

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

STORIES • INTERVIEWS • BOOK & FILM REVIEWS



**STORIES** ALIETTE DE BODARD • GEORGINA BRUCE • PRIYA SHARMA • JESS HYSLOP  
NIGEL BROWN • LAVIE TIDHAR • STEVEN J. DINES **INTERVIEWED** LAUREN BUEKES  
**NEW** JONATHAN MCCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED **PLUS** JAMES WHITE AWARD WINNER • READERS' POLL RESULTS



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### Readers' Poll/This Issue

Congratulations to Suzanne Palmer whose 'Tangerine, Nectarine, Clementine, Apocalypse' was the most popular *Interzone* story of 2012. Thanks to everybody who voted and commented (especially Ray Cluley who sent us long and enjoyable critiques of every story he selected which we just couldn't find the space for).

Martin McGrath always supplies us with many useful statistics but the most striking this year, as Martin says in his summary on page 6, was the low turnout, the lowest since 2005. Perhaps the days of the Readers' Poll are numbered.

Martin is a busy man. He also runs the James White Award (more details on page 67), and we publish Shannon Fay's winning story herein. Also in this issue is the first instalment of Jonathan McCalmont's new Future Interrupted column, which you can find in the books section, and our team of artists is joined by Wayne Haag who's worked as matte painter on films like *The Fifth Element*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Superman Returns* and *Wolverine*.

### Overseas Delivery

Some overseas subscribers, particularly those in the USA, might've had to wait much longer than normal for their copy of issue #245. It's always worth repeating, especially for the benefit of newer readers, that we send magazines abroad on a "premium" service which claims a delivery time of within five days to all of Europe and within seven days to the rest of the world – but the March mailing actually took up to six weeks to arrive.

At the time of writing we're still undecided but this issue might be mailed on a slightly different service, which on paper takes longer but which apparently goes straight into a country's internal postal service rather than via an agent, thereby arriving quicker than the premium service has been (go figure), about ten days if we're lucky. Whichever service we use, please let us know when your copy arrives. Meanwhile, apologies for any delays you've been experiencing.

### TTA Novellas

TTA Novella 1, *Eyepennies* by Mike O'Driscoll, is still picking up rave reviews, and the second novella, *Spin* by Nina Allan, out now, is already being met with the same sort of reaction. If you pre-ordered, it should have arrived with this issue.

*Spin* (and *Eyepennies*) can still be bought for £6 UK / £7 Europe / £8 RoW. Longer novellas will be slightly more expensive but the first five can be bought on subscription for just £25, free postage to anywhere in the world, which relatively speaking is incredibly cheap for such high quality, good looking, limited editions as these.

Hopefully all of you will be pleased to hear that we've just added novella #6 to the list: *Reclamation Yard*, a new Quay-Endula story from *Islington Crocodiles* author Paul Meloy.





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## **Submissions**

Unsolicited submissions of short stories are always welcome, but please follow the contributors' guidelines on the website.



## **COVER ART: GORGÓNAVIS BY JIM BURNS**

prints are available: contact the artist via his website at [www.alisoneldred.com/artistJimBurns.html](http://www.alisoneldred.com/artistJimBurns.html)



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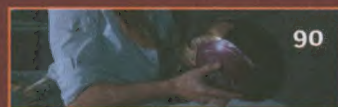
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## DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

**Iain Banks's** online announcement headed 'I am officially Very Poorly' was widely circulated and brought widespread dismay: 'The bottom line, now, I'm afraid, is that as a late stage gall bladder cancer patient, I'm expected to live for "several months" and it's extremely unlikely I'll live beyond a year. So it looks like my latest novel, *The Quarry*, will be my last.' (www.iain-banks.net) I have no words for this.

**Just Not Cricket.** 'An Intellectual Property Officer has ruled that a London-based company cannot use "Batman" as trademark for a range of cricket-related products because it is too close to "Batman" owned by DC Comics. The Officer accepted there was a "conceptual dissonance" between the two words but that they "may be easily mistaken for one another". He also added that there was a comic book character called Batsman, who is the "disembodied consciousness of a future Batman". (*The Cricketer* magazine)

**Awards.** *Arthur C. Clarke:* Chris Beckett, *Dark Eden*. • *BSFA.* Novel: Adam Roberts, *Jack Glass*. Short: Ian Sales, 'Adrift on the Sea of Rains'. Artwork: blacksheep, for the *Jack Glass* cover. Nonfiction: The World SF Blog, chief editor Lavie Tidhar. • *Kitschies.* Novel: Nick Harkaway, *Angelmaker*. Debut Novel: Karen Lord, *Redemption in Indigo*. Cover Art: Dave Shelton for his own *A Boy and a Bear in a Boat*. Discretionary: The World SF Blog. • *Philip K. Dick:* Brian Francis Slattery, *Lost Everything*; special citation, Andri Snær Magnason, *Lovestar*. • *Tiptree:* Caitlin R. Kiernan, *The Drowning Girl*; Kiini Ibura Salaam, *Ancient, Ancient*.

• *The Barftas* (British Academy of Rubbish Films and Terrible Acting; the UK Razzies) had one genre winner at their inaugural presentation, Nicholas Cage as worst actor for his lead role in *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*. (*Independent*)

**George Lucas** had an alt-history moment: 'The sequence with the battleships at each other is from an old pirate movie or an old seafaring movie from the 1700s.' (*Revenge of the Sith* DVD commentary)

**As Others See Us.** Marveling at the success of *Game of Thrones*, the *Telegraph* pinpoints its assumed minority audience: 'Aside from *The Lord of the Rings*, the thinking goes, audiences have always been resistant to grand fantasy. So it is strange that the programme, based on George RR Martin's bestselling books, is Sky Atlantic's most popular, and has drawn millions of unexpected fans: housewives and historians, as well as the expected men with beards.'

**Hugo Nominations.** Herewith the two most voted-on categories from this interminable list. Novel (1113 ballots): Kim Stanley Robinson, 2312; Mira Grant, *Blackout*; Lois McMaster Bujold, *Captain Vorpatril's Alliance*; John Scalzi, *Redshirts*; Saladin Ahmed, *Throne of the Crescent Moon*. • Dramatic – Long (787): *The Avengers*, *The Cabin in the Woods*, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, *The Hunger Games*, *Looper*.

**As Others See Some Of Us.** The London V&A David Bowie exhibition (until 11 August) has much sf content, e.g. a section on 'inner space' with J.G. Ballard's

*The Atrocity Exhibition* on display. From the catalogue commentary on Bowie's 1976–1979 album covers: 'Their harsh visual bleakness was irresistible to a generation of NME-reading sad young men (and they generally were young men) whose imaginative parameters were sketched out by the novels of J.G. Ballard, the music of Kraftwerk and the films of Nicolas Roeg.' Poor chaps!

**Orson Scott Card's** *Adventures of Superman* script for DC Comics, controversial not for its actual content but on account of Card's vigorous anti-gay polemics elsewhere, was put on hold when artist Chris Sprouse – who found he 'wasn't comfortable' with the online furore – left the project. (*Wired*)

**Michael Moorcock**, according to one of the more subtly terrifying news stories posted on 1 April, had his beard shaved off. Credit went to 'the famous Texan barber Olaf Priol'. (*Moorcock's Miscellany*)

**Christopher Tolkien**, not a man for talking to the press, granted his first ever interview to *Le Monde* last year; a translation eventually appeared online. 'They eviscerated [*Lord of the Rings*] by making it an action movie for young people aged 15 to 25,' he complained. 'Tolkien has become a monster, devoured by his own popularity and absorbed into the absurdity of our time. The chasm between the beauty and seriousness of the work, and what it has become, has overwhelmed me. The commercialization has reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of the creation to nothing. There is only one solution for me: to turn my head away.' *Le Monde* added:





'Invited to meet Peter Jackson, the Tolkien family preferred not to.' (*Worldcrunch*)

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept of Sceptical Cryptozoology Down Under.* "Come to think of it, it could have been a kangaroo," Coates agreed ... "Still, I'm certain this thing had wings, and tentacles on its head." / "A leaping kangaroo can look like anything," the Sergeant grunted.' (Vol Molesworth, 'Arkaroo' in *The Forerunner*, 1953) • *Flowing Speech Dept.* 'His accent slipped off his tongue like water.' (Lisa Mangum, *The Hourglass Door*, 2009) • *Dept of Permeability.* 'Indescribable things rushed through him.' (Brian W. Aldiss, *Cryptozoic!* aka *An Age*, 1967) •  *eyeballs in the Sky.* 'Sprawling out on the floor of the bar, Elvis's eyes fell on the underside of a nearby table...' (Stephen Bury [Neal Stephenson with J. Frederick George], *Interface*, 1994)

#### R.I.P.

**Ángel Arango** (1926–2013), Cuban author who was the last survivor of his country's three founding fathers of sf, died on 19 February; he was 86.

**Allan B. Calhamer** (1931–2013), designer of the board game *Diplomacy* – which had considerable impact on sf fandom – died on 25 February aged 81.

**Basil Copper** (1924–2013), UK author of many supernatural horror and Cthulhu Mythos tales (also of detective stories continuing the adventures of August Derleth's Solar Pons), died on 3 April; he was 89. He was honoured as World Horror Grandmaster in 2010.

**Roger Ebert** (1942–2013), leading US film critic and Pulitzer prize-winner who fondly remembered his early days in sf fandom (see for example his introduction to *The Best of Xero* ed. Pat and Dick Lupoff, 2004), died on 4 April; he was 70.

**Richard E. Geis** (1927–2013), US author, publisher and fan who won many fan Hugos between 1969 and 1983 – seven (one tied) as fanwriter and six (one tied) for best fanzine with *Science Fiction Review/The Alien Critic* – died on 4 February aged 85. Most of his fictional output of 110+ volumes was soft porn, but there were several sf titles including collaborations with Elton T. Elliott.

**Rick Hautala** (1949–2013), Finnish-US horror author and screenwriter whose *Night Stone* (1986) was a bestseller and who received the Bram Stoker Award for lifetime achievement in 2012, died on 21 March; he was 64.

**James Herbert** (1943–2013), popular UK author of many bestselling horror novels beginning with *The Rats* (1974, filmed 1982 as *Deadly Eyes*) and including *The Fog* (1975), *The Survivor* (1976, filmed 1981), *Fluke* (1977, filmed 1995), *Haunted* (1988, filmed 1995) and *Creed* (1990), died on 20 March aged 69. He received the OBE in 2010.

**Dan Morgan** (1925–2011), UK guitarist and author whose sf novels include *The Richest Corpse in Show Business* (1966), the telepathy series beginning with *The New Minds* (1967) and the Venturer Twelve space adventure trilogy (1968–1973 with John Kippax), died on 4 November 2011 aged 85. At the time this went unreported

in sf circles.

**Andrew J. Offutt** (1934–2013), US fan, anthologist and prolific author of sf, fantasy and (mostly as John Cleve) erotica, died on 30 April; he was 78.

**Nick Pollotta** (1954–2013), US author who wrote many books for shared-world franchises – especially the 'Deathlands' survivalist sf series, using the house name James Axler – died on 13 April. Standalone novels include *Illegal Aliens* (1989) and *That Darn Squid God* (2005 with Phil Foglio).

**Jennifer Schwabach** (1967–2013), US author and poet whose novels are *Dark Winter* (2006) and *Curse's Captive* (2007), died on 26 March; she was 45.

**David B. Silva**, US horror writer (first published 1981), anthologist and editor of the magazine *The Horror Show* 1982–1991, died in March aged 62.

**Derek Watkins**, UK trumpet player on every James Bond film soundtrack from *Dr No* to *Skyfall*, died on 22 March aged 68.

**Paul Williams** (1948–2013), US author, editor and fan best known for inventing rock journalism in 1966 with *Crawdaddy* (using his fanzine publishing experience from the 1962–1963 *Within*), died on 27 March; he was 64. As Philip K. Dick's literary executor he promoted Dick's posthumous career and ran the PKD Society 1983–1992; his *Only Apparently Real* (1986) is an early contribution to the now vast field of Dick studies; he launched a notable project to collect all Theodore Sturgeon's short fiction, editing 11 of the resulting 13 volumes.



# READERS' POLL RESULTS

## MARTIN MCGRATH

The comfortable winner of the 2012 *Interzone* Readers' Poll was Suzanne Palmer with 'Tangerine, Nectarine, Clementine, Apocalypse', polling almost 50% more votes than her nearest rival.

The top ten short stories are listed on the opposite page.

Just outside the top ten were stories by Priya Sharma – 'Needlepoint' (#242) and 'Lady Dragon and the Netsuke Carver' (#243) – and 'Fata Morgana' by Ray Cluley (#238).

The number of votes was low this year, the lowest number since I started doing this poll in 2005.

The voting continues to be overwhelmingly positive, with no stories receiving aggregate negative votes, all stories receiving at least one positive vote, and half (15 from 30) receiving only positive votes.

The most divisive story of the year was 'Strigoi' by Lavie Tidhar (#242), which placed in the top ten despite receiving the highest number of negative votes.

Picking the most popular issue of 2012 was complicated by a larger than usual variation in the number of stories per issue. Issues #242 and #239 topped the poll in highest aggregate scores but both had six stories. Issue #241 had only four stories but had the highest average satisfaction ratio and is the only issue with three stories in the top ten.

## J.B. Zeelie

I note that you're not judging the artwork this year (something I've always found hard to do and always found odd. I mean you have one artist doing six covers and you have to say, "The award for best cover art goes to...").

I must say that I like the new-size magazine with the extra pages, easy-read font and anti-glare paper. The new format allows for longer stories (always a plus) and more book, film and DVD reviews, plus author interviews. It's a great step forward. Most impressive. Same goes for *Black Static*.

## Madeline Carlson

I love this magazine. Every time I pick up an issue I find inspiring and well written stories. [But] 'Strigoi' by Lavie Tidhar: sorry, I've had enough of vampires, even if they do appear in *Interzone*.

## Soon Lee

I thought it was a good year for *Interzone*. The new format took a little getting used to but overall the more compact format works well. Content-wise, it was strong: there were a few stories that didn't do anything for me but nothing I hated, and interior art generally complemented the stories.

Actually, now that I have chosen the stories to upvote (nearly half of them), I've changed my mind: it was an excellent year for *Interzone*.

## Barbara Hvidt

*Interzone* is great and very affordable – even for those of us who live in Europe. Keep bringing these great stories out :). Also, it has a nice size, easy to take with you yet sturdy.

I tried convincing my teacher that science fiction should be in the curriculum but alas, to no avail. The others are definitely missing out. I'll keep enjoying it on my own.

## AJ

I was ambivalent about the decision to change the format of *Interzone*, I did like the older full-sized format that I've been used to for so many years, but I have to say the new-look magazine is a pleasure to hold and read and the artwork and design continue to improve. The stories were of a generally high standard again this year and my subscriptions to *Interzone* and *Black Static* continue to supply more than their money's worth.

## Derek Grubb

#239 was an excellent issue. Quite happy with the overall artwork for 2012, so agree there is no need to vote. This is now a nicely polished magazine. I'm looking forward to my *Flux* freebie.

## Phil P.

There has been a notable change in *Interzone* in recent issues – and I don't just mean the shift in the size and shape of the magazine (although that has been dramatic). I've noticed you seem to be including writers from a much more diverse range of backgrounds. I don't know whether this is a deliberate policy, but it's definitely resulted in some excellent stories – particularly 'The Message' by Ken Liu. Still, I hope *Interzone* won't become too international a magazine. Part of me still thinks that Britain's longest running science fiction magazine should contribute to the nurturing of UK-based



writers – one reason why I've been particularly excited by the discovery of Priya Sharma on these pages. Keep up the good work.

### Mrs T

'Lady Dragon and the Netsuke Carver' by Priya Sharma had me gripped from start to finish. A web of hatred, love, anger, resentment, power and instinct was intricately detailed by the author. Each character had multiple layers and we got to peek beneath the surface they presented to the new Samurai world (and maybe to themselves in some cases!). I especially liked the red fox twist...but I won't spoil it for anyone who hasn't read it yet!

### Peter Hollo

I'm going to decline to downvote anything this year. There are certain *Interzone*-style stories that I don't really like, somewhat melodramatically emotive, with often unbelievable settings (to me), but I don't feel anything jarred so strongly that I'll give it a negative vote. Not voting is strong enough, perhaps.

I adore Lavie Tidhar's work, and I'm really glad to be reading him regularly here. The Central Station stories are building to something very powerful, and I thought 'Strigoi' was one of the best stories this year.

There were stronger and weaker issues for me, as usual, and other than Lavie's perhaps not that many truly standout stories. But I'm still very happy whenever I receive the new issue, and I'm definitely liking the new format.

### Ray Cluley

While votes for the artwork have been understandably cut this year (and it would have been very tough to choose anyway), I can't not mention how much I loved the range of covers provided by Ben Baldwin.

I've chosen seven stories that I really liked: 'The Complex' by E.J. Swift, 'Twember' by Steve Rasnic Tem (probably my favourite *Interzone* story of the year), 'Tangerine, Nectarine, Clementine, Apocalypse' by Suzanne Palmer, 'Steamgothic' by Sean McMullen, 'Ship's Brother' by Aliette de Bodard, Priya Sharma's 'Needlepoint' (more fantasy than sf, an excellent reminder that *Interzone* is a science fiction and fantasy magazine), Lavie Tidhar's 'Strigoi' (I was wary at first – that title suggested vampires, and I'm almost as bored by those as I am zombies – but this one's different).

I always enjoy what's on offer in *Interzone* and I look forward to many more stories for a good many more years...

### David Thomas

I would like to vote for the excellent 'Strigoi' by Lavie Tidhar as best story. Also glad to see Tidhar's 'The Book Seller' appear in this year's first issue. An honourable mention to 'Mirrorblink' by Jason Sanford. I really disliked 'Steamgothic' by Sean McMullen. Dull and self-indulgent.

### Gavin Raine

My vote for the best story of 2012 goes to 'The Remembered' by Karl Bunker. The author created a charming love story and wrapped a mythological tale within it – all without needing to introduce a single human character. I thought it was one of the most original and enjoyable stories I've read for a long time.

## TOP TEN SHORT STORIES

- 1 'Tangerine, Nectarine, Clementine, Apocalypse'  
Suzanne Palmer  
ISSUE #239
- 2 'Mirrorblink'  
Jason Sanford  
ISSUE #243
- 3 'Ship's Brother'  
Aliette de Bodard  
ISSUE #241
- 4= 'Steamgothic'  
Sean McMullen  
ISSUE #241
- 'Moon Drome'  
Jon Wallace  
ISSUE #243
- 6 'Fearful Symmetry'  
Tyler Keevil  
ISSUE #238
- 7 'Strigoi'  
Lavie Tidhar  
ISSUE #242
- 8 'The Message'  
Ken Liu  
ISSUE #242
- 9= 'The Complex'  
E.J. Swift  
ISSUE #238
- 'One Day in Time City'  
David Ira Cleary  
ISSUE #241





ILLUSTRATED BY WAYNE HAAG

# THE MACHINEHOUSE WORKER'S SONG

## STEVEN J. DINES

Back in the days when we were virtually elbow to elbow in the machinehouse, jagged edges were more numerous but more easily taken care of. If you stepped out of line, you were taken out of the shift. If you were taken out of the shift, you did not eat for two days and you did not drink for one. You did not get a bunk to sleep in either; you slept standing up. Jagged edges in the machinehouse did not stay jagged for long.

But that was before.

When Reeves died it left two of us. Maybe we were the last two men on Earth; we didn't know.

We dragged Reeves' body into storage and finished the shift. We always finished the shift. Later, we showered, ate our rations, then dragged him out again. Samuels cleared the equipment from a trolley, we laid Reeves on it and wheeled him over to the space where the light from the corrugated sky fell onto the floor. There were no windows in the machinehouse. All the light was artificial, except what managed to squeeze in through that dirty sheet of ridged plastic three hundred feet above our heads. In that faint rectangle of light that looked like a door in the floor, Reeves no longer appeared tired but completely at peace. He was the latest in a long, unbroken line to yield to the sickness. They seldom went like Reeves: at least he was still in one piece.

It made no difference to Samuels how they went. A seventy to eighty, he was an old-timer – *the* old-timer now Reeves was gone – and he followed the machinehouse rules to the letter.







Sam checked the clock on the wall. "He'll get his hour in the light, Jacob. Then we ship him out like the rest."

Ship him out.

Ship him *where*? We hadn't received any communication from the outside world in fourteen months. Meanwhile, we'd lost over one hundred co-workers, seven overseers among them, all good, hard-working men. For the drop in productivity alone, I'd expected someone to have made contact with us by now. Something was wrong.

But try telling that to Samuels.

You'd think the sight of Reeves lying on the trolley would thaw him out a little. Wrong. "We still have a job to do," he said. "We have enough food, we have enough water. We have books for the mind and a piece of the sky for the soul. And we have the work."

"The work," I repeated sourly. "What are we working *for*, Sam? There's only us left. Maybe we should be looking for a way out too..."

"It is the work that makes us free," Samuels said. "Don't forget that – unless you want to end up like him."

Reeves. Looking at the rope-burn around his neck, I found myself feeling grateful for the method in which he'd chosen to cure himself of the sickness. There were heavy gears and spinning blades throughout the machinehouse that could cure a man any time he wanted. And faster, too.

**They took me** from my mother when I was a ten to twenty. My father gave me to them. I never saw her again. Compared to the others though, I was lucky to have some memory of her to take with me into the machinehouse. Some of them came in at one to ten, orphans, with no recollection of either parent. I knew my mother, or at least that I had had one once.

She appeared to me when I least expected her, a ghost haunting my mind, a good woman – I think – who inexplicably had a smile for the world but not for me. I remembered she had black hair and that it was long, some way below shoulder-length, and that it had red highlights that caught the sun. I remembered the highlights vividly. The shape of her face would change each

time I pictured her in my mind's eye, oval one time, heart-shaped the next, and I could never quite recall the colour of her eyes, but her hair, always. Long hair, black hair, red highlights.

**Whether you came** to the machinehouse as a one to ten or a ten to twenty it was a *big* place. As the years passed, however, it got smaller. And smaller. With almost all of the workers gone and shipped out to be buried, the place began to feel a little bigger again – and me with it.

I had room to move: I could lift my arms out from my sides and not touch someone else. I could whisper, I could shout, I could talk in a silly high-pitched voice if I wanted to, and the only person it could possibly make any difference to was old Samuels and he wore earplugs on shift anyway, or used to, on account of the time four years past when the overseers made us pull quadruple-shifts and his ears started to bleed from all the work noise. But they said the old die hard son of a bitch *smiled* as he bled, and I believe that.

Samuels sensed me looking at him, and shot me a look from his station.

"What are you stopping for? There's plenty to do."

He said that last part as one word: *plennytado*. It was one of his catchphrases. If during a shift Samuels ever saw someone stop for a breath or sip water from their canteen or even just take a step back to look at what it was they were assembling, they heard a voice from somewhere behind them say *plennytado*.

You learned everyone's catchphrase in the machinehouse. In fact, you learned everything there was to know about their character (but not their past or where they came from; nobody spoke about that). At first, you found it pretty interesting. But anything heard on repeat for a period of thirty or forty years became somewhat corrosive. So, you had to tread carefully in the house. You had to grind off most of the rough surfaces or jagged edges of yourself until you were left with something smooth that worked with the other parts of the machine. Otherwise, the machine could easily tear itself apart. One of the unspoken rules in the machinehouse was the work should never stop, never suffer.



But I was in the mood to break some rules.

"Where are they, Sam?" I said, turning to see his jaw clench and unclench. I still had some jagged edges, it seemed. "Where are the others?"

"You know where they are, Jacob. They're all dead."

"No, the ones in charge," I said. "They must know what's been happening here. We're dying out. And with no new arrivals we'll *die* out. Where are they?" I asked again.

"It's not your place to question. Leave it be. Besides, some things are not worth knowing."

"Like the end of the world."

"Yes, like the end of the world. 'Sides, we have everything we need to sustain ourselves and the work. We want for nothing in here."

"Except people," I said. "People to *do* the work."

Twelve hours later, as we lay on opposite sides of the bunkroom, tired and sore from a long shift and both contemplating the underside of the empty bunk above our own, he said, "You and I are here, Jacob. We'll carry on until we can't, it's as simple as that."

"Samuels?" I asked. "Do you think they've already shut us down and forgotten to tell us?"

"No," he said quickly. "I don't. And you shouldn't think it either. The sickness lies that way."

I laughed and shook my head. "Why shouldn't I ask questions of those who have abandoned us?"

I heard the creak of Samuels' bunk as he sat up.

"No one has *abandoned* us. Weren't you listening earlier? We have everything we need; everything we've *always* had. Nothing has changed. Okay, yes, we've lost some people –"

"Many," I interjected.

"Alright, many –"

"Most."

"Alright, most. We've lost *most* of our people, but – dammit, you've made me lose what I was going to say."

"If we are to die," I said slowly, "and they have not shown us the courtesy of providing our replacements, then the work dies with us, right? Then what has it all been for? Answer me that."

Samuels swore in the darkness, and said nothing more. Likewise, I rolled on my bunk and showed him my back.

I couldn't sleep. Sometime later, I rose and walked through the dark onto the machinehouse floor, where I glimpsed the moon peering down at me from beyond the corrugated sky. I did not enter the quadrangle of moonlight on the floor, but sat a respectful distance back from it. As on every other night when I had sat there, the moon seemed to have a reddish hue. I hung around for a while – until it drifted out of sight – reminded of my mother.

When I returned to my bunk, I found Samuels perched on the edge of his, waiting to unload his answer.

"They will come back," he announced with vast confidence. "They need the work as much as we do. They would never let it stop – die – like this."

I wasn't so convinced and opened my mouth to say so when he spoke up again. "That's the second time you've asked what this is all for, Jacob. Watch your way, son. Watch your way – before I find you tangled inside some machine's guts too."

Is that a warning, I wondered, or a threat?

"Who cares anymore," I murmured, and climbed into bed.

That night, I dreamed I was in a blackened forest, running through the trees as I chased the moon above me, the face of which, glimpsed intermittently through the treetops, carried a reddish hue and an odd but unmistakable resemblance to my mother. Suddenly, the trees drew closer, hemming me in on all sides until I could no longer keep pace with her, and so she slipped away. Then I found a gap and a clearing and a way to chase anew, though with the moon far ahead and a lot of ground to regain. Still, I ran, and ran. Until the trees closed around me again. But then I found another gap, another clearing...and so on. In all, I chased and lost my mother over a dozen times before I finally awoke in a lake of sweat with my last thought still circling through my mind.

Is it a warning or a threat?

**The following day**, I waited until the reverberations of the klaxon faded at the start of our fourteen hours to make my announcement.

"I'm done, Sam," I said as I waisted my tool

belt and followed him onto the machinehouse floor. "I'm leaving. This is to be my last shift."

It felt good to hear myself say it. Every worker's secret dream was now my reality.

Samuels not only ignored me but started to hum a tune – 'The Machinehouse Worker's Song' – which I had not heard in the house for a very long time.

But I shrugged off the twinges of guilt and said it again: "I'm leaving."

He would not look at me.

"So you've caught the sickness too, eh?" he said.

"I don't see it that way."

"Of course you don't." He laughed. "They never do – the ones who catch it. You'll get your hour in the light for this, son, mark my words. Of course, maybe I'll decide not to give it to you, seeing as I'll be the only one left."

"You'll give it," I said confidently. "You're a good and decent man, Sam."

"Maybe," he answered. "Maybe not. Maybe I've caught it too."

I said nothing and gave him the time he needed to think about what I'd just said. We went to work in different parts of the house, just like in the old days. Back then, each man knew his own job and wasn't allowed to discuss it with anyone else. Your value came from your unique skill. Without that you became valueless. So, thanks to tight lips and the division of our workspaces, no one ever really knew what it was we were building. The conveyor track carried our individual contributions through the machinehouse before finally delivering it to the outside, complete and ready for use. Of course, for a year now, as a result of our diminishing numbers, we had given them increasingly deficient product. No one outside of the machinehouse seemed to give a shit about that, not anymore. Which is how the sickness got inside in the first place. And once it got inside, it spread fast. With each worker we lost, the ones left behind also began to question the work, and pretty soon the rest of us could sense that our house of cards was ready to fall. Even Sam saw it, though that stubborn son of a bitch would never admit it.

I figured I'd given him enough time.

"So, old man...nothing to say?"

I could no longer see him, but his voice carried to me across the machinehouse floor. "You won't be going anywhere," he said. "Except to your end, of course. From all you've seen in here you haven't learned a thing, clearly."

"I miss her, Sam." I listened to the echo of my voice until it was suddenly snatched away by the sound of the machinery at Samuels' station. "My mother... I have to see her again."

"We all miss someone," he said. "But the work helps us to forget, son. We help it, it helps us. That's the agreement. That's the circle."

"But I don't want to forget her anymore," I said.

"Listen to me, Jacob. They say you can't look straight at the sun and not go blind. Well, you can't think about the family you've lost and not go mad. It's the same thing."

"It is not," I said brightly, "and she isn't the sun. She is the *moon*, Samuels. And I *will* see her again. I *will* look at her – and not through some dirt-covered window either, no. I'll see her with nothing between us except the air outside and the smile on my face. And it will be wonderful, Samuels. Wonderful."

"Do you hear yourself? How you sound already? Just like one of them."

"No. This is different. *I am different.*"

"They all said that too. There *is* no way out, son."

"Ah but there is," I said. "There is up."

"*Three hundred feet?*" Samuels' laughter drowned out the sound of the machinery. "Best of luck to you then. Make the most of your delirium while it lasts. But mind: you'll be dead on the other side of it. Mind that. Meanwhile, there's work to do and I intend to do it."

We spoke no more on it that day. Instead, I worked and listened to Samuels vent his frustration on whatever lay in front of him. The old timer's hammer-blows echoed through the giant vault of the machinehouse like some weak, dying pulse.

**The only way** out of the machinehouse was through the corrugated sky. The single door that led to the outside was ten-inch thick reinforced steel, locked from the outside, and lined with tiny shrapnel explosives that would shred any man without the proper security code. The con-



veyor track that carried our dead to the outside, like the one that carried the fruits of our labour, went through a pulse scanner: if anything living passed through it then the track stopped instantaneously and the security doors were activated. No, our little window on the sky was the only crack in the dragon's armour.

My makeshift scaffold was eighty feet tall when it collapsed one week later. There was an ominous groan from the floor area seconds before one of the support legs folded in on itself. If not for that groan – if the leg had gone with a clean snap – it most certainly would have been the end for me. However, the gradual buckling allowed me a couple of seconds to jump from the top of my tower and grab onto some vertical tubework over on the wall. Behind me, as I shimmied down a broad pipe, the scaffold collapsed with a near-deafening crash. Twenty feet from the floor, the holding brackets on the pipe screamed loose above me. The resulting jolt sent me falling to the floor.

When I limped into the bunkroom a few minutes later, nursing a broken ankle, I found Samuels stretched out on his bunk. He had a wet hand towel draped over his face. Sweat glistened in the crooks of his arms, and the veins running up and down those arms looked just about ready to pop. He'd not long finished his shift. The towel moved as underneath it he worked his mouth on something.

"What happened?" he asked. He must have heard me enter.

"You tried to kill me," I said.

His jaw – and the towel – stopped moving.

"What are you talking about? You're killing *yourself* with this foolish business of yours."

"You did something, Samuels. You tried to kill me. Maybe you heated one of the scaffold tubes when I wasn't looking, I don't know. But you did something. Be big enough to admit it."

He plucked the towel from his face and let it drop to the floor. "You've got the sickness, Jacob. You've abandoned the work. You've abandoned *me*, your last and only friend in this place. I've got nothing to say to you."

"What did you do?"

Samuels remained silent.

"What did you do, Samuels? Tell me."

"Paranoia," he said wearily. "Another classic symptom. Once you start on the road of thinking about yourself, everybody else is out to get you somehow, right?"

"Not everyone," I said. "Just you."

"I'm all there is left!" he said, laughing. "If there were more of us here then I'm sure you'd be pointing your finger at them too, like some of the others did when they got the sickness, remember? Stark, Pressman, Flynn – they all did it, and three dozen besides them. My God, Jacob, you've seen it happen often enough to know it's happening to you now – right, son?"

"What did you do?" I repeated.

Samuels shook his head. "You don't deserve to leave this place."

I raced across the space between us. Before he could sit up straight in his bunk, my hand was around his throat, pinning him to the pillow.

"Don't ever try to stop me again," I said, squeezing his windpipe in the claw of my hand.

His head moved in an attempt to nod as he pawed at my wrists. Reluctantly, I let him go. He rolled off the other side of the bunk and fell onto his hands and knees on the floor, struggling to breathe. When he had some air in his lungs again, he swivelled his head to look at me. I saw that I'd put fear in his eyes.

Good, I thought.

But there was also blood in his mouth, staining the pits and fissures of his teeth, and I was certain I had not put *that* there.

"Have you ever considered," he gasped, "for a second...that maybe you don't deserve any more than this? That maybe...maybe you owe this place for the small freedom you already have?"

"What are you rambling about, old man?" I asked. "This isn't freedom."

"The work," he said, "frees us by letting us forget."

"Forget what?" I asked.

"What life was like for us before we came here. Before the work freed us."

"You're talking in circles," I told him.

Samuels gave a firm nod. "You're absolutely right." He looked up at me, looked me in the eye, all of his fear gone, spent. "I did not tamper with that thing you're building out there." He paused to draw breath and to wipe some of the blood

from his lips. "And you're not the one who's leaving."

**Samuels never picked** up his tools again.

There was no special marking of the occasion, it merely *was* – a moment that came and went without anyone paying attention to it. Which saddened me at first, then left me feeling mad. What was a life for if not for leaving a mark?

Surprisingly, I wished for a return to the old days, if only for the sake of my old co-worker, for there had been a time when a man reaching the end of his last shift would have sent a special buzz throughout the machinehouse. But there were only two of us left and while Samuels slipped in and out of consciousness, I rebuilt the scaffold, although I did so with an increasingly heavy heart. Indeed, the higher it reached the heavier my heart became until finally the pull of Samuels was so great that I gave in to it and him and returned myself to the machinehouse floor, knowing that the work on my plan was to be deferred until he'd had his hour in the light.

Samuels deteriorated quickly.

Looking back, I can admit that a small, shameful, secret part of me was glad.

### **Mother moon.**

While Samuels slept in the bunkroom, I sat in total darkness on the machinehouse floor, leaning back against the scaffold base, and waiting for her to show me her face on the other side of that grubby little piece of sky. A feeling of unworthiness fell over me but at the same time I was fizzing with desperation to see her again. The unfinished scaffold reached up toward where she would appear, a stretching arm amputated at the wrist.

I heard a fierce coughing come from inside the bunkroom and glanced at the door. I looked up, and saw the edge of her face appear over the edge of the sky. I rose to my feet, still looking up, and tried not to hear the *continued* coughing going on not fifty feet away from me. But sickness or not I couldn't ignore it. I ran into the bunkroom.

His back was turned toward the door, and as I entered he tried to sit a little straighter on his bunk. In the machinehouse, we covered our weak

spots for the same reason that we smoothed our jagged edges. To fit in. The machine is only as strong as its weakest gear, or so the saying went.

"I'm dying," Samuels said without turning around, as if he was talking to the wall, or maybe the machinehouse itself. "I'm not the one with the sickness and yet I'll get my hour in the light before you. Where is the fairness in that? Where is the *justice*?"

"You'd rather it was me," I said from the doorway.

"Of course. You've forsaken the work. You don't deserve your place. When my time is up, everything will stop. I never thought I'd live to see the day." He laughed then; a bitter sound. "But I *won't* see it, of course."

"I'm sorry," I said, though my eyes were closed, seeing mother moon.

Samuels laughed again then went into a fit of coughing.

"I can take my lungs packing in like this," he said eventually. "They're old and weak from the work. But my heart, Jacob, I can't take that being broken by my memories of so many men – *good* men, Jacob – falling to their knees with the sickness. Damned fools, every one."

I opened my eyes.

"So is any man who would be free to be called a fool – is that it?"

"Any man in here, yes."

"And what about outside of here – are they all fools too?"

"I don't know what's out there," he said. He turned around and found me in the gloom of the bunkroom. His stare pinned me like a bug to a board. "And neither do you."

"What about the men you work for?" I asked. "Men you've been working for for sixty years."

"It's sixty *five* years," he said. "And I work for the machine not any man."

"But who works the controls, Sam? Why, a man, of course."

He shook his head. "I am a small cog in a machine. As are you, Jacob – although thanks to the sickness you've become a small cog who suddenly believes he is a big one. Well, you're grossly mistaken, son."

"It might be we are both mistaken," I said. "You, for believing that you work for an idea.



Me, for believing I'm more than this place will allow me to be. On the other hand, Samuels, we could *both* be right..."

Now Samuels stood up and faced me across the room.

"Did you come charging in here with a point or what?" he said. "I need to rest."

"No point," I said. "You started this conversation anyway, not me. I merely came in to see how you were and to ask if there was something I could get you."

He looked at me for a moment.

"You did, huh?"

I nodded.

"In that case, I wouldn't turn down the offer of a glass of water."

"Would you like a glass of water, Sam?"

"Yes, Jacob, I would. Thank you."

I nodded and left. We weren't all that different, I thought. Two people on opposite sides of a river, disputing where that river must lead: either to the open ocean and the silver path to the moon or to some empty mill where Samuels could work himself to a satisfied death.

When I returned, Samuels was stretched out on his back, asleep. A long, bubbling snore escaped him, and from the corner of his mouth a trickle of blood ran across his cheek, staining the pillow red. I turned him onto his side to lessen the chance of him choking should any more blood enter his throat, covered him with a blanket, and then left the glass of water next to his bunk. Watching him, I once again felt a longing to revisit the past, when Samuels wasn't dying, when a hundred other men weren't already dead, and when the machinehouse itself had its own strong, metallic pulse.

But then the silent call of mother moon drew me out from the bunkroom and back to my scaffold. She was gone, past my small window on the sky, but at least my thoughts were able to move on from death and dying to the day when I would crack through the corrugated sky and see her again. I wanted to climb—to climb fast and finish the build, but I knew that if something happened to Samuels while I was up there I would carry it with me for the rest of my days.

So, I waited.

**On the morning** he died, I had the dream again. The dream in which I chased mother moon but she outran me, she *always* outran me, over and over again. My eyes snapped open, and I rushed straight to Samuels' bedside.

He lay awake, his body thin, his eyes sunken to deep, shadowy hollows. For six days he had refused to eat anything and sipped only what water his dying body could convince him to take.

"The light grows tired of waiting, old man," I said. "It wants its hour with you sooner rather than later." It was meant to be a joke, but there was no merriment in me—a residue of my dream, perhaps—and none came out.

Samuels managed a smile with his cracked lips. "It'll have me when I'm good and ready, son, and not a second before." He looked straight into my eyes, challenging me. "Maybe they'll come yet. I'd like to meet my replacement before I... retire."

It seemed we were both in the mood for a tussle. I shook my head. "You shouldn't hold onto such foolish fantasies, old man."

"What would you have me do?" he said. "Build myself a scaffold and run off looking for mummy? You'll never make it, Jacob."

"What if I do?"

"You won't," he said.

"But what if?"

"No one has so far. They've all gone mad in trying. What makes you think you're any different?"

"They had no reason to leave," I said. "They questioned the work, yes, but when it came down to actually leaving none of them could go ahead with it."

"The machinehouse sure doesn't make it easy," Sam said. "Then, it isn't supposed to."

"No, we didn't make it easy, Sam. It wasn't this place, it was us. The ones they were leaving behind. Those men needed a reason to go, one more convincing than the hundred or so reasons to stay."

"You're saying it's easier for you because you only have me keeping you here. Don't let me stop you, son. Crash on. See how far you get out there."

I smiled at that.

"And miss this?" I said. "Not for anything."

He swatted the air with his hand. "Don't bullshit me," he said. "It isn't about me. I'm just... in the way."

Assuming I was dismissed and the conversation was over, I went to return to my bunk. Samuels let me get halfway before he reeled me back in. "You dress it up real neat and pretty, Jacob, but it's really the sickness doing all the talking with you now. You know that, right?"

I went back and stood at the foot of his bunk. My long shadow covered him, surrounded him, like a coffin.

"I could have left by now," I said. "I delayed completing the scaffold because of you."

"Don't kid yourself, son."

"So why am I still here?" I asked. "I could have left days ago, and yet I haven't. Why?"

"You don't deserve it, Jacob. You never have. And you know it, somewhere, down deep. It's the sickness talking – all of this. The kind of freedom you want doesn't exist, not for us. We belong to the machinehouse."

"What are you talking about, old man? I'm leaving." Tonight, I thought. Whether he's alive, dead, or in the throes of it, I'm leaving, *tonight*.

"I can't remember what I did," Samuels said, ignoring my question. "Before I came here. The work... the years, they've rubbed the stain of it out of my mind, and that's a good thing, Jacob. That's something I'm very grateful for. *I am free.*"

"You've never been free," I said. "You're nothing short of a prisoner here."

Samuels lifted himself onto his right elbow and coughed into the cup of his left hand. Bright runlets of blood leaked from between his fingers and dripped onto the bunk cover.

"My mind is free," he said, wiping his lips. "But if I *am* a prisoner here it is because it is a prison."

"What?"

"I finally figured it out, Jacob. Why they've never come for us. Why they've let every one of us die in here. We're prisoners. Outcasts and criminals. Whatever it is that's happened out there, we're the lowest of their priorities. To hell with us, right?"

I shook my head. "You're lying."

"And if the world out there *is* burning, son, we're already ghosts. We just don't know it yet. So you see, there's nothing left for us except

what's in here and – " he rapped the side of his skull with a bloody knuckle " – in here. So don't go messing around with what's inside your head, Jacob. Go through that roof and god knows what will come at you, son. The air outside is tainted with bad memories. Go back to the work. It'll keep you free. It – "

"Old man – *stop!* Stop this insane rambling. Your plan to kill me didn't work, so you're trying to get inside my head. It won't work. I won't let it. So stop and go with some dignity to your hour in the light."

"Go back to work, Jacob," he said. "Sing the worker's song and be content with what you have."

I walked away, back to sitting by my unfinished scaffold with my daydreams of mother moon.

**I did not** hear it happen.

When I returned to the bunkroom two hours after our fight, carrying his food rations on a plate, I found him still on his bunk. But it looked like he had a garland around his neck.

It was blood. And tissue.

A lot of blood, a lot of tissue.

I should have heard it.

That much blood, that much... It made a lot of sound coming out of a person.

I should have heard it.

**Two days passed.**

In the deepest silence it had ever known, the machinehouse spoke to me more than ever before. I tried not to listen. But even as I climbed up and down the scaffold, with every trip bringing me closer to the corrugated sky, I remembered long-ago shifts when everyone sang 'The Machinehouse Worker's Song', when the sound of our collected voices fused with the clash and clang, the batter and bang of our labour. In those moments, there was no past or future, no you or I, but only the present and us.

Moments of such beautiful certainty.

At nightfall, three hundred feet of scaffold swayed beneath my feet as I finally reached up and ran my fingers across the undulations of the sky. On the other side, mother moon awaited. I lifted a long wrench I'd chosen for the task, and



thrust it upward. The sheet of corrugated plastic, thick though it was, cracked and fell apart like eggshell.

Tears filled my eyes as I climbed from the scaffold platform onto the machinehouse roof. I stood slowly, drawing a breath on the way. The air was hot and thick, a little hard to swallow. You had to work at it. I didn't mind, though. It was real. It wasn't pumped out of some machine and recycled a million times over. Besides, I hadn't tasted the real stuff since I was a boy. While I tried to get used to it, I looked around.

Off to my right, beyond a forest of leafless black trees, the sky was bleeding. Or at least bleeding was what it looked like. There was no clear, definite line of separation. Where the darkness of night met the red spill over on that far side of the sky, black and red swirled together to reach an agreement of colour. There was a sense of just that, agreement, everywhere. Though for how long, I wondered. Looking at the horizon, at where the two coloured factions met, my stomach churned with uncertainty. It seemed to me that the blackness of the night was all that held the other colour at bay, that the red wanted to run rampant across the sky, to claim it for itself, whatever it was. I did not understand.

But I understood enough.

I wanted to see her: mother moon. And when I looked up, she was there, floating deep within the black sector of the sky. Only, she was doused in whatever had happened to the world. Whatever had happened to *her*. The stars glinted like dirty rubies around her, and she wore a blood red veil.

I wanted to know why she let them rip me from her hand.

But the past was a cockroach, scurrying into places I could not reach. All I could remember still was that she had long hair, black hair, red highlights.

Looking up at the face of mother moon, it was impossible to deny that the red colouring was confined to either streaks or highlights; it streamed down her face in a veil, like a dye running or –

– some bone-deep cut  
bleeding.

Did I do that to her? I thought. To my mother?

Suddenly, guilt clenched my gut and forced me to look away. I found myself looking once again at that enormous wound on the far side of the sky, and it occurred to me that somehow it was my handiwork too, somehow I had caused that deadly haemorrhage. Foolishness, of course. But I sat on the roof and buried my face in my hands. I no longer wanted to look upon the world I didn't know. Why would I? I was the boy who'd killed the moon.

But was it the truth? That was the question I struggled to answer. Was her hand limp when they'd ripped mine from hers?

But the past was a cockroach...

Some time later, underneath my feet, the klaxon announced the beginning of a new shift. Its call blasted through the hole I'd made in the machinehouse roof and rolled past me into the surrounding forest, where its echoes shook the dust and ash from the trees.

No one will answer, I thought. No one will ever answer.

By the time I climbed down the scaffold, silence had returned to the machinehouse floor. I felt the weight of it pressing at my temples, but the voice of Samuels reached out to push it back. *Go back to work, Jacob*. First thing in the morning, I would give him his hour in the light. He deserved it, every one of us did, though perhaps not the boy who'd killed the moon. Being the last, I would not have mine anyway. Besides, there was too much to be done, and more to be *undone*. So, I waisted my tool belt, walked deep into the bowels of the machinehouse, and began my shift. It wasn't long before I heard his voice – Samuels' – hum the opening bars of 'The Machinehouse Worker's Song'. As I listened, his was joined by another, and then another, and then another. Soon, he had a chorus one hundred strong.

I cleared my throat, and then we all sang together.

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Steven has published stories in over seventy print and online markets, including *GUD*, *Not One of Us*, our sister magazine *Black Static*, with another forthcoming in *Crimewave 12*. He is currently seeking representation for his first novel. For more information, visit his website at [stevenjdines.com](http://stevenjdines.com).

# TRIOLET



ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID GENTRY



# JESS HYSLOP

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## I

An elderly lady lives at the end of our street. She has hair puffed out like a small white cloud and an air of dwindled grace. She wears bangles round her skinny wrists, floral skirts that reach to her ankles, shoes with Velcro fastenings. Her name is Mrs Entwistle. She grows poems.

Mrs Entwistle's poems sprout from flowerpots and vases, ice cream tubs and pencil pots, watering cans and china teacups. They spill from window boxes and climb crooked trellises, spreading over red brick and plastic drainpipe. Their leaves can be large or small, rubbery or velvety, dark or light. Some bloom in violent bursts of magenta and azure, some in delicate constellations of white stars, and some have drooping, elongated heads that toll their verses like bells.

Lisa and I walk past Mrs Entwistle's house every weekday morning on our way to work. It sits at the corner where we part, I heading left to the train station, Lisa turning right to the bus

stop. Each morning we admire the poems blossoming in the front garden, and sometimes Lisa puts out a hand to touch the daisy-like flower that bobs, inviting, over the low brick wall. At her touch the plant perks up on its stalk, as though clearing its throat. Then it recites, in the tones of a jaunty schoolboy:

*Welcome, footsore traveller,  
Welcome to my door.  
Come sit and have a cuppa  
Before you have to leave once more.  
But if you have to rush along,  
I wish you a good day.  
Perhaps when you're less busy  
You'll find time to come my way.*

The ditty always makes Lisa laugh, and it puts a smile on my face too. We go to work with lighter steps, and promise each other that we really will pay a visit to Mrs Entwistle soon.

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Jess Hyslop lives in Cambridge, UK, where she spends a good deal of time wandering between bookshops, cafes and cinemas while pondering her next writing project. She studied English at the University of Cambridge, and was there awarded the Quiller-Couch prize for creative

writing in 2010. Her winning story, 'Augury', has since been published by Shortfire Press. Her short fiction has also appeared in *Daily Science Fiction* and *Cast of Wonders*, and is forthcoming in *Mirror Dance*. She tweets @JinxedJester.

## II

Sometimes – rarely – Mrs Entwistle gives away her poems. Sarah Ealing, who we know through Bob and Carol, has one – an elegant perennial with curling leaves and a single violet bloom. Sarah claims to have had the poem for seven years now, and that it needs nothing but a bit of watering every other day and it's as healthy and happy as ever. I ask to hear it, one time when we're over there, but she stays my hand before I can touch the leaves.

"It's private," she tells me, and blushes.

Lisa exclaims about it as we walk home. "That blush!" she says. "What do you think it's about, her poem?"

"I don't know," I say.

"Well, it's got to be sex, hasn't it?" says Lisa. "I bet it is. Gosh. And she always seems so, you know, staid?"

"Staid?"

Lisa looks up at me. "You know what I mean. Sarah's never been married, Carol said. And she's as old as we are."

I shrug. "She's always seemed nice to me. Maybe she's just had bad luck. And anyway, who're you calling old?"

Lisa hooks her arm through mine. "I'm jealous," she admits. "I want a secret poem."

"Maybe we should call on Mrs Entwistle then."

"This weekend," says Lisa, firmly.

But that Friday my father has a fall and breaks his hip, and we have to go out of town to visit him and look after mum, and we forget all about our visit to the old lady at the end of the street.

## III

It's two months later, in mid May, when Mrs Entwistle hails us from her living room window. Lisa and I have just said our morning goodbyes and are about to part ways when the old woman's voice drifts out across her front garden.

"Good morning, Mr and Mrs Lewis!" she says, and her face goes all over wrinkles as she smiles. "Would you care for a quick cup of tea? I have something for you."

We pause, I with my briefcase in hand, Lisa with her folder tucked under her arm.

"Morning, Mrs Entwistle," I say, then hesitate. "I'm afraid we'll be late for work."

Lisa gives me a don't-spoil-this look. "Perhaps we can step in for a minute," she says.

I give her a no-we-can't look, and she shoots back a well-I'm-going-to look.

"Yes, in fact, that would be lovely," Lisa says, loudly for my benefit. And she unlatches Mrs Entwistle's front gate and goes up the path, dodging the enthusiastic flora that burgeons on either side.

"Wonderful!" says Mrs Entwistle, and disappears from the window.

I dither on the pavement. Lisa looks back at me from among the flowers. "Oh, come on, Jim."

"But the office –" I say.

"A poem, Jim!" says Lisa. "A poem, maybe. Just for us."

I remember that visit to Sarah Ealing, picturing the flush that rose in her cheeks, the secret blooming behind her eyes.

I sigh. "All right, then. One cup of tea."

Lisa holds out her hand, and I take it as I join her outside Mrs Entwistle's door. But I brush against something as I do so, and when I look behind I see a plant springing back into place. It's an unruly bush with dark, serrated leaves, amongst which heavy scarlet flowers lurk and peep. The contact with my skin wakes the poem, and the bush begins to speak.

*The Jackdaw Prince, old as the hills,  
Though newer than the moon, some say;  
His realm of air, hung above the world,  
In a cradle of storms. All black feathers he,  
And pinprick eyes. The Cat King will not catch him.*

Mrs Entwistle opens the door. She smiles at us, then purses her lips at the bush as it continues with its poem. Its voice is low and scratchy.

*The Prince swoops over earth; his wings  
Bring fright, but they delight the Turtle's daughter,  
Who swims beneath the void. The Cat King yawns...*

"No discipline, that one," says Mrs Entwistle. "I keep cutting it back, and cutting it back, but no! It creeps right out again."

The plant is giving me the creeps too. Its poem is odd, the rhythm jarring, the imagery scatter-brain and strange.



Mrs Entwistle notices me eyeing it. "Oh, don't bother about it, dear," she says, patting me on the arm with a jangle of bracelets. "It'll drone on all morning. Do come inside."

We leave the bush whispering tales of the Jackdaw Prince, and follow Mrs Entwistle into the house. Inside, the place is tidier than I expected. I had pictured plants proliferating in the hallways, jostling for space on every surface, bursting from drawers and trailing down the walls – but in reality the house is neat and clean. There are many poems, yes, but they are lined up evenly on tables and windowsills. Diminutive plants are placed strategically on side tables, whilst the larger ones are pushed into corners out of the way. The wallpaper is pink and yellow and the whole place is very cheery.

Lisa follows Mrs Entwistle into the living room, where there is a faded three-piece suite that looks as though years of use have moulded it into the form of perfect comfort.

"Do have a seat. I'll get the tea."

"Can I give you a hand?" I ask, but the old woman waves me away.

I put my briefcase on the floor and Lisa lays her folder on the glass-topped coffee table. We settle together onto the couch.

"Only a few minutes," I tell Lisa.

"I know, I know," she says reluctantly, and in truth I understand how she feels. The house seems to welcome visitors with the enthusiasm of a favourite aunt, and now that I'm inside I'm loath to leave its hospitable embrace. I feel very cosy sitting there with my wife, waiting for tea.

There's a poem on the coffee table, a cascade of blue florets on narrow stalks. I consider touching it, but then I remember the bush in the front garden and I think better of it.

Mrs Entwistle comes in with the tea things on a plastic tray. "It's so nice you could come in," she says as she pours and stirs. "I haven't spoken to you two in such a long time. But I see you in the mornings, sometimes. You seem very happy. I trust everything's well?"

We tell her that yes, we are very happy and that yes, everything is well. I ask after Mrs Entwistle in return, and she says that she is very dull, but tells us instead about her grandson who is just starting university. Then she mentions that she

has heard about a man in Japan who also grows poems, and whom she'd very much like to meet one day.

Lisa seizes her chance. She has been holding in the question the entire time; I can tell by the way she's turning her teacup in her hands. Now it pops out: "You said you had something for us?"

"Ah yes. So I did." Mrs Entwistle pushes herself out of the armchair and goes over to the windowsill. Her bangles clack against one another as she chooses a ceramic flowerpot from among the many receptacles that line the sill. When she turns back to us, we see that climbing from the soil inside the pot is a delicate, twisting stem. It curls upwards in a miniature helix, and bluish leaves sprout from it at intervals like tiny steps on a spiral staircase. At the summit of the stem are two flowers. They have small, rounded petals and are a merry yellow.

Lisa flashes me an excited grin. "A poem!" she exclaims. "For us?"

"Exactly, my dear. It sprouted last week, and I knew immediately who it was for."

Mrs Entwistle hands the pot to Lisa, who takes it reverently. "Look, Jim."

"Yes," I say. "Very pretty."

"Can we listen?" asks Lisa.

"Of course." Mrs Entwistle sits down again in her armchair and smiles at us. "It's yours."

"Go on, Jim. Touch it," Lisa orders.

I reach out a finger. It looks very big and unwieldy next to the graceful little plant. Carefully, I touch one of the petals.

The spiral stem flexes. The leaves twitch. The flowers dance, ever so slightly.

*Two lovers lie together sleeping,  
In their dreams their lives they share.  
Entangled in their secrets' keeping,  
Two lovers lie together. Sleeping  
Is the world without, none peeping  
On the inner world, the bedroom where  
Two lovers lie, together, sleeping.  
In their dreams, their lives, they share.*

"A triolet," says Mrs Entwistle. "How exquisite."

"Oh, Jim!" Lisa breathes. Her eyes are wet.

"It's beautiful," I say, and I mean it. The plant's voice is like water lapping gently on a far-off

shore, and its words conjure alluring memories of Lisa and me, together, on our honeymoon in Saint Lucia eight years before.

I've the urge to kiss Lisa right then and there, but she's still holding the pot and the last thing I want to do is make her drop the poem.

We don't go to work that day after all. Once we've said our goodbyes and our thank-yous to Mrs Entwistle, we go straight home and take the poem to our bedroom, where we place it safely on top of the chest of drawers. Lisa touches it again and we listen, enraptured by the seductive verse. Then we make love right there in the mid-morning sunlight, and it's like we're newlyweds again.

#### IV

Lisa and I listen to the poem almost daily after that. We shiver with delight at the leaping rhymes, and we marvel at the movement of the words, the shifts and pauses that bring new meaning to the repeated lines. Lisa looks up 'triolet' on Wikipedia and we agree that it is indeed an exquisite form.

We show off the poem when Bob and Carol come over for dinner, but when they ask to hear it we shake our heads.

"It's private," we say as one, and Lisa giggles.

Bob and Carol look a little sour. I make up for it by pouring them both another glass of Merlot.

"I think that was a bit mean of us," I say later, when our guests have gone home.

"Hmm. Maybe." Lisa is washing up, and her hands pause under the suds. "It's true though, isn't it? It is private."

I slide my arms around her waist. She gives a little start, then laughs. I brush my lips across her hair. It smells of Fructis shampoo, of Bob's cigarette smoke, of the Bolognese sauce we just had.

"It's private, all right," I murmur. "It's extremely private."

She turns and kisses me, and I don't care that she still has the wet rubber gloves on; I pick her up and carry her upstairs.

A few months after Mrs Entwistle gives us the poem, I get a promotion at work. Lisa's thrilled at first. She books a table at The Vine and we toast my success over a shared platter of hors

d'oeuvres. But the glow of achievement wears off after a couple of weeks and the downsides start to reveal themselves. The promotion comes with a transfer to another office much further afield, so I'm out early and late home. I don't catch the train anymore either, so Lisa's left to walk alone in the mornings past Mrs Entwistle's house. She tells me that the old lady often leans out of the window and asks after us.

"She says to tell you congratulations," says Lisa, as she watches me eat a late supper of cold chicken and salad.

"That's nice. Tell her I say thank you." I should go round and say it myself, of course, but I have even less time now than ever and somehow it always slips my mind.

I never forget to water the poem though. It sits in our bedroom, under the window, and the flowers are merry and yellow as ever. I am beginning to believe what Sarah Ealing said, about hers having lasted for seven years straight. I hope ours is as hardy.

#### V

I am beginning to suspect that Lisa's in a mood with me. Work is demanding at present, so I often don't get home until eight or even nine in the evening. Lisa says hi when I come in the door, asks me about my day, and sympathises about the lateness of my return – but all the while she's got this look in her eye that says we-really-need-to-have-a-talk.

I don't have the energy to start that conversation, but I do apologise. "I'm sorry about this, hon. I really am," I say. There isn't really anything I can do, however. Work is work. And as my dad always says, *you gotta do your time*.

"It's OK," Lisa says, but I can tell that it isn't. She doesn't laugh like she used to when we watch *Mock the Week*, and she doesn't touch me at all when we go to bed.

Then, one evening when I come in, Lisa is sitting watching a wildlife programme. Onscreen, some tanned presenter is washing a baby elephant, which is lying on its side and swishing its tail in contentment. I take off my coat, then come up behind the couch and lean down to kiss Lisa on the top of the head. She whirls, startled, and almost elbows me in the face.



"Jim! I didn't hear you. Miles away."

*With the elephants?* I want to joke, to bring a smile to her face, but I can't make the words come out. When I walk into the kitchen my feet feel heavy. I go to the fridge and take out the leftovers Lisa has put by for me. I place the Tupperware on the counter and then I pause, and just lean there for a minute. My head is reeling.

When I bent to kiss Lisa, her hair smelt of cigarettes.

Logically, I know there could have been any number of people smoking around Lisa during the day: people at work, in the street, at the bus stop. But the smell had been too familiar. Too familiar by far.

That night, even though I have to be up at six the next morning, I go to touch the poem sitting on the chest of drawers.

Lisa stops me. "Not tonight, Jim. I'm tired. OK?"

"OK," I murmur. "OK." Then I glare at the yellow flowers as if this is all their fault.

## VI

Coming home one evening the following week, I find a cigarette butt on our front lawn, lying in the grass under the living room window. It's small and wet and squished, but I pick it up and hold it between my fingers and look at it for a long time.

I don't say anything to Lisa. She doesn't say much to me either. It's becoming the way of things. But that night, I creep out of bed and, very slowly, pick up the poem in its ceramic pot. Then I carry it downstairs and put it on the dining table at the rear of the living room. I pull out a chair and sit in front of the plant. In the darkness, the yellow of the petals falls to grey.

I touch the curlicue stem, gently, and a voice like a Saint Lucian beach recites:

*Two lovers lie together sleeping,  
In their dreams their lives they share.  
Entangled in their secrets' keeping,  
Two lovers lie together. Sleeping  
Is the world without, none peeping  
On the inner world, the bedroom where  
Two lovers lie. Together, sleeping.  
In their dreams, their lives they share.*

Maybe it's just because it's late, and I'm tired and agitated and heartsore, but the final two lines sound different to how I remember them. I touch the plant again, and again it delivers the poem. I listen hard to the last part.

*Two lovers lie. Together, sleeping.  
In their dreams, their lives they share.*

Where once it prompted an intense wave of satisfaction, the couplet now makes me uneasy, as though there's some sinister meaning lurking beneath the innocuous words.

I sit there in the dark and listen to the poem over and over, trying to uncover the secret of those lines.

Eventually, brain throbbing and eyes aching, I give in. I take the poem back upstairs, then slide back into bed and stare at the ceiling. I think about Lisa and the cigarette butt. Then I think about lying, and sleeping, and dreaming, and sharing.

## VII

My head is pounding from lack of sleep, but I get up at my normal time of 6am. I dress in my usual work clothes: suit (grey) and tie (navy blue); clean shirt; smart shoes. Lisa stirs under the duvet but does not wake. I do not kiss her goodbye.

I take my briefcase and coat from the hall and go outside. It's November, and the morning is clear and cold. The car starts on the third try, and I reverse out of the driveway. I drive round the corner and park the car where it won't be spotted by Lisa when she heads out for the bus. Then I walk back round to Mrs Entwistle's house.

It's early, so the old woman doesn't open the door when I first ring the bell. It's only after several minutes of waiting and ringing and waiting and ringing again that I hear the slow shuffle of her feet descending the stairs. When she opens the door, it's only by a crack, and she keeps the chain on.

"Who is it?"

I feel a moment of shame when I see the fear and suspicion on her elderly face, but then I think of Lisa and the cigarette and I thrust the feeling away.

"It's me," I say. "It's James Lewis."

"Oh! Mr Lewis." Mrs Entwistle sounds relieved. "I didn't know who it was, this time in the morning. I didn't know who it could be."

"Can I come in please?"

She blinks at me, still bleary from sleep. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I think it is."

"It's not Lisa?" she asks, concerned.

"Look, can I come in?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Mrs Entwistle backs away and fiddles with the chain. It takes her a minute, but then she has it unhooked and it falls away. She opens the door wider. She is wearing a mauve dressing gown and no slippers. Her feet are small and blotchy, roped with swollen blue veins. "Come in, come in," she tells me.

I step over the threshold and close the door behind me. Mrs Entwistle beckons me into the living room. There, she gestures to the couch, but I shake my head, so she remains standing too. She studies my face.

"What is it, James?"

Her anxiety appears genuine, but I don't trust it. Like the poem, it seems to be hiding something.

"The poem," I say. "The poem you gave to Lisa and me."

"Yes, I remember. A triolet, wasn't it? Most lovely."

"Lovely!" I snort. "I don't think so. Oh, I don't think so." I'm shaking my head over and over; I don't seem to be able to stop.

"What's this?" She frowns. "I thought you liked it."

"It's changed!" I say, and suddenly my frustration all rushes out at once. "It's changed, you old hag! It's all gone wrong!"

I half expect Mrs Entwistle to cringe away from me, but instead the old woman's face goes hard. "It hasn't changed, Mr Lewis," she says primly. "None of my poems change. It's not in their nature."

"I'm telling you, it's different," I insist. "I was listening to it last night, and it –"

"It won't have changed," Mrs Entwistle repeats. "The poem is still the same poem. But, I suppose, it may have grown."

"Grown? Grown? What the hell does that

mean? It doesn't look any different. It's the poem that's different."

She shrugs. "If you insist," she says, in the tone of a teacher humouring a wrong-headed pupil.

My anger builds. "You're some kind of witch," I accuse. "These poems, you give them away like they're presents, like they're blessings. But they're not. They're not. That *thing* – it's some sort of spell, isn't it? And now Lisa... Lisa..."

My knees feel suddenly weak. I drop onto the couch. "It's ruined everything," I moan.

Mrs Entwistle stands over me. "I'm no witch," she says, "and my gift to you and your wife was no spell. It's just a poem."

"But what does it *mean*?" I cry. "Two lovers lie – what does it mean by 'lie'? What kind of lying? And which lovers? Which two? 'In their dreams,' it says. In whose dreams? In mine? Who's sleeping? Am I sleeping? Is Lisa? With whom? Jesus, *what does it mean*?"

Mrs Entwistle looks down at me with sad eyes. "It's a poem," she says again. "It means what you make it mean. It means what you think it means."

I put my face in my hands. "Great," I groan. "That's just great."

On my way out, I brush again against the bush with the red flowers.

*The Jackdaw Prince*, it says, *old as the hills...*

"Shut up!" I growl at it. "Goddamn it, can't you just shut up!"

*The Cat King will not catch him*, it replies, gravely.

## VIII

I don't go to work that day. I don't go home either. I just get in the car and drive. I take the A-road out of town, and then I take every back road I come across until I'm way out in the countryside. There are no clouds in sight, and the air is a pale winter blue.

I follow a winding road and find myself at the top of a ridge, overlooking a steep-edged valley. I can see for miles. There's a viewing area by the side of the road, with a faded sign and a small car park. I pull over, tyres crunching on the gravel, and then I just sit in the driver's seat looking out at the fields and the woods, the verges and the hedgerows, the hills and the villages spread out below. I gaze at the vista of greens and browns,



and think about how, if I were to touch any of those plants, they would remain silent. They would not spout pernicious, ambiguous verse. They only mean one thing: themselves.

The thought is comforting, and after a while I drift into sleep.

It's dark when I awake. I check my phone and find I have four messages: three from the office and one from Lisa. I turn the phone off. Then I start the car and drive carefully back into town. I feel much calmer.

The November night has come early, and the lights are on in the windows of all the houses in my neighbourhood. I head home, but when I get to the house I find myself driving right past it. I drive past Mrs Entwistle's place too. But when I get to Bob and Carol's I ease on the brakes and let the car dawdle outside. They haven't drawn their curtains yet, and I can see right into their front room.

*Peeping on the inner world*, whispers a voice at the back of my mind.

I cannot see Bob, though their car is in the driveway. Carol, however, is sitting in an armchair with her back to the window. Her left hand is lying on the armrest, palm up, fingers curled slightly inwards. The top of her head peeks out above the chair, and it lists slightly to the right. She is asleep.

I wonder where Bob is. I wonder if I would find Lisa at home, if I went back there.

*Together, sleeping.*

*Bob and Lisa*, I think bitterly. *And in another sense, Carol and me. Except I've woken up. Poor Carol.*

I drive on before my lingering gets too suspicious, and I surprise myself again when I stop outside Sarah Ealing's house. Only once I'm there do I realise why I've come.

Her poem; yes. I can picture it now, with its lone violet flower, the petals curving upwards to cradle the stigma waiting at its heart. And Sarah's blush, I can see that too. We had thought it mere embarrassment at the time, but now another detail of the incident springs to mind: how Sarah's eyes flickered to Lisa as she put a denying hand upon my own.

Seven years, Sarah had told us; her poem had flourished for seven years. Now, sitting outside

her home, I ache to know whether the plant remains as hale as it was that day. Had it 'grown' like mine and Lisa's, so perversely? Or did it endure still, as elegant as it ever was?

I summon my courage. Leaving my briefcase on the passenger seat and my phone, switched off, in the glove compartment, I get out of the car and go ring the bell.

Sarah does a double-take when she opens the door. She's wearing pyjama bottoms and a knitted, oversized jumper. There is a pair of reading glasses perched on her nose, and her hair is pulled up into a scruffy ponytail.

"James," she says. "Did you... Did I forget... Did we arrange...?" She peers behind me, presumably looking for Lisa.

"No," I say. "No, don't worry."

"Then why... Sorry, but why are you here?" Her gaze moves over me, and suddenly I'm aware of my hair, dishevelled from my nap in the car, and my crumpled work clothes. "Are you all right?" she asks.

I open my mouth and shut it again. I honestly don't know if I'm all right, but I suspect that I'm not.

Sarah looks at my car, parked in the street, then back at me. "Do you... Do you want to come in?"

"All right," I say.

I wipe my shoes on the mat, though they're pretty much spotless as all I've been doing is driving around all day.

We stand awkwardly in the hallway.

"Would you like a -" Sarah starts, but I interrupt her.

"Your poem," I blurt out.

Alarm flits across her face. "My poem?" Her tone is wary, but also - I think - ever-so-slightly wistful. "What about it?"

I pause, biting my lip. "Can I... Can I hear it?"

"It's -"

"It's private, I know." I smile at her wearily, trying to show her that I understand; I understand now what she meant by that blush, by those words. "I know."

She looks at me, her expression guarded.

"Please," I say. "I'd really like to hear it. Please."

Her eyes soften. Slowly, she reaches out and takes my hand. ■





NIGEL BROWN

# SENTRY DUTY

Illustrated by WAYNE HAAG



## SOMETHING APPROACHED THE HUMAN'S SKYCART

Ssthra held to her sentry post, ears fanned forward. For the moment, her hunger was forgotten: she took guarding the skycart seriously.

The pumice vibrated, picked up by her sensitive clawed feet. Was a Ra-Ki approaching?

Ssthra scanned the twilight beyond the phosphorescent warmth of the skycart's unnaturally smooth side. Nothing lay ahead but the rubble-strewn landscape, grey and cool, up to the flaring oasis of H'rath.

A rattle of pebbles behind her; she spun around to face the danger.

Reflex kicked in. Ssthra's tail arched over her head, ready to strike. Its tip wept a drop of poison in anticipation of a kill. Then training overwhelmed her instinct. Call the other guards. She fumbled with the shell horn slung around her thickset shoulders. Ssthra's air bladder gripped the horn, ready to blow, when she saw who the intruder was – she stumbled back in shock.

The figure towered above her, almost twice her height. This was a stick figure compared to that of her own kind, the Sisterhood. It swayed in a strange way, almost lurching towards her. This was no Ra-Ki. It was the human.

What was it doing here? Nothing the Chief Guard had said had prepared her for this.

The human approached her, though it didn't seem to see her standing there in plain twilight. She hesitated. The Sisterhood's Grand Mother always met this strange creature in the Tent of Assembly at H'rath, or inside the skycart that nestled on hard rock like a grounded ssst fly. A guard like herself should have no business dealing with the human.

Did it not know its place? Did it not know it was breaching their customs by approaching her? She bristled at the thought, yet curiosity made her hold her ground. Like others of the Sisterhood, she'd had little opportunity to meet a human. By now, the human was so close her tail stinger twitched.

The human wore overgarments, even covering its head, on what Ssthra took to be a balmy twilight for this time of year. She sniffed. The human smelled like damp sacking.

She hissed a greeting at the giant – low, so as not to alarm.

The human froze in place at the sound. Even through its bulky outer wrapping, she could see that it was startled. Its mouth opened once – twice – winking like a spotlight as its inner heat escaped into the air.

She hissed again.

Now it saw her. Its head tipped forward, it advanced a few paces. Its hand came up, fiddled with something on its chest.

"I'm – *squawk* – *squawk* –" The human's stubby fingers rotated a button, then she heard: "I'm sorry –"

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I didn't mean to alarm you." The voice came from its waist, at her eye-level, from a small box set in its middle. Did it speak from there on its body? It sounded like how a Sister would talk to a young one barely out of the egg: slow and deliberate.

But it didn't matter. This was still speech.

"I am not alarmed," she said, though her heart hammered hard, her pouch clenched against the eggs that nestled in her abdomen. "I am on guard here. My Sisters ring your skycart – we offer full protection for your...human-place-of-living," she ended, lamely. It was beginning to dawn on her that she was speaking to something that didn't fit into the simple categories of the world. As she spoke, she realised her mistake in holding her ground.

This was the job of the Grand Mother. How could she have been so foolish?

"Uh..." the human said. "I appreciate your protection." It peered about. "We're safe here?"

Ssthra glanced across the cool dark rock towards the crimson light of H'rath that glowed on the horizon. Parasol trees arched in black silhouettes over the H'rath crater, each frond splayed to catch more than its share of volcanic warmth. The Ra-Ki fed on the trees' tangled undergrowth that lapped the crater walls.

"Of course," she said.

The Ra-Ki were harmless, a useful food source, even if their conversation was dulled by their



limited point of view. But they were also curious. If one of them noticed this tantalising hotspot of a skycart close by on the cold plain, it would lumber towards it and damage the skycart with its bulk and heavy tail.

"Are we alone?" the human asked.

Ssthra blinked in surprise at the question. "Yes," she said, stiffly. "I patrol this *akkro*, my Sister the one beyond, one Sister on each side."

What was the human up to?

She watched as it reached inside its overgarment, pulled out a little stick. Her nostrils twitched at the unfamiliar smell.

The human gave the stick a sudden wave with a flick of its wrist. The stick's end burst into flames. "Sscreeow!"

She cried out in shock at the brilliant glare, the instant heat. She stumbled backwards. Her tail arched up over her head again, her lips peeled back from her rows of serrated teeth.

The human too jumped back.

"Wha - ?" she heard. "I didn't mean to surprise you. Haven't you seen a ciggie before?"

The flame at the stick's end had died a little. It still glowed a fierce white, but despite the burning, the human held it between gloved fingers, seemingly unconcerned at the conflagration at the end of its hand.

Ssthra tried to gather her wits. "No," she said. "This is new to me." She hoped the human wouldn't pick up the tremor in her tail.

"Probably a good thing," the human said, mysteriously. Then it lifted the stick up to its mouth, placed the non-burning end inside it, and inhaled its breath through the stick. "Aahh," it exhaled. "I needed that."

Curious and amazed, Ssthra crept a little closer. "What are you doing?" she ventured.

"Something I shouldn't," the human said, slightly slower. "It's banned on my home planet, of course, but I've spent enough time in the Outer Worlds to pick up the habit. The insurance policy doesn't allow *smoking* on this mission. The ship's got internal smoke sensors. I've got my own supply here, though." It paused, then said: "You won't report this, will you?"

Ssthra considered the human's request. She knew that she was already in trouble, speaking to the human without permission from the Chief

Guard. No matter that it was the human's fault for approaching her. She stated: "I am a sentry on guard against Ra-Ki. There has not been an intrusion. There is nothing to report."

The human's shoulders slumped down a little. "Good! You see, to do this, I had to temporarily disable the perimeter cameras - but I was dying for a ciggie, see?"

Ssthra nodded, knowledgeably. Speaking like the Grand Mother was easier than she thought.

The human inhaled at the stick again, nodded down at her. "I'm Jo, by the way," it said. "Glad to meet you..."

She stared up at Jo, uncomprehending.

"What's your name?" Jo said, at last.

"Ssthra," she replied.

"Good!" The human pulled the stick out of its mouth, flicked glittering, burning flakes of ash on the bare pumice underfoot. "Now we're acquainted," Jo said, "I'm sure you won't mind if I bother you again? Most of the planetary survey's on automatic. I'm just hanging around here."

"No," Ssthra said, puzzled, as Jo didn't seem to be hanging off of anything. It shouldn't be talking to her; it had already gotten her into trouble, but what harm could come from a few words?

"The survey's kicked up to a higher level," the human continued. "Seems like your stable volcanic vents are rare in this neck of the woods."

Ssthra blinked her scaly lids in puzzlement, but she answered: "Yes." She hoped this was the diplomatic response.

"The investigations are going to go on for a while." The human inhaled the stick again, this time drawing a deep breath through it. The stick's end glowed as bright as an ember from the oasis. "Looks like I've got time to get to know you people. You're one of the smaller ones, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Jo said. "There's two types of your people, aren't there?"

Ssthra thought for a moment, then the meaning dawned on her. "No," she said, appalled. "My people are the Sisterhood. The others you refer to cannot travel between the different oases. They are just..." her ears fanned with disgust "...the locals: the Ra-Ki. We can converse, but they are not of the Sisterhood."

"I see," Jo said. "So they're a different species."

Ssthra was unfamiliar with the word, but she said "Yes."

After the human had gone, she reflected for a long time on the strange encounter.

Despite its ungainly height and a body no wider than a parasol tree-trunk – and she couldn't see how it managed to stand upright and walk around without a counter-balancing tail – she knew now that it was not much different inside than one of her fellow Sisters. A Human-Sister. She rolled the idea around in her mind like a tasty piece of Ra-Ki under her tongue.

But that thought recalled her dilemma. This was her fifteenth twilight out here; fifteen turns of duty while her claws scratched up and down on the bare rock. The wind blew in a steady murmur from the crater, carrying the scent of Ra-Ki. It only served to tease at her belly, to salivate the sticky ends of her tongue. Without the distraction of the human, hunger gnawed at her thoughts. Would she have time enough in the short day tomorrow to feed for the growing batch of eggs that had begun to swell inside her belly? The Chief Guard would be along on her rounds later but, even so, Ssthra would not sneak away and hunt. She would not desert her duty to the Sisterhood.

But whatever happened with this human and its skycart, the Sisters would be leaving the H'rath oasis soon. If she didn't get her fill, she'd starve on the next migration, along with her eggs.

**The pattern repeated** over the next few twilights. Ssthra spent the first part of her duty striding up and down before the glowing skycart, still hungry from her scant daytime feeds. Then her Human-Sister Jo would appear, stand about and inhale those strange ciggies.

She'd learned to tolerate the Human-Sister's presence, even look forward to it when it loomed up in the crimson twilight.

One time, the human lowered the ciggie down to her snout.

"Go on," Jo said. "Try one. It's done me no harm – helps with the day I've had. The survey's now gone to level three. I hoped it would be done by now. No reflection on you, but I'll be glad to get on my way."

At last Ssthra understood Jo perfectly. "Yes,"

she said. "Migration is always a time to look forward to, when the Sisterhood strides as One through the great dark to the next oasis."

"Well I don't do any striding between my stellar stop-offs. I'm mostly asleep."

*Carried in the skycart*, Ssthra thought to herself. She felt she was beginning to understand the Human-Sister's strange ways.

"But you look forward to it?" Ssthra asked.

Jo paused, then said: "I had a broken heart once, a long time ago. Took this job as a babysitter for the automated system. The only way I could get out here."

Ssthra sifted through Jo's words, puzzled by references to damaged internal organs and sitting down, but she understood the urge to migrate in the Human-Sister.

Jo waved the ciggie at her again. "You sure you don't want to try one? It's just *tobacco*."

"What is tobacco?" Ssthra asked. "The act of inhalation?"

Jo made a stuttering noise from the throat. "No," Jo said. "Tobacco's what it's made of."

As the ciggie approached her face, Ssthra dipped her eyelids at the white glare from its tip. Her nostrils felt swamped by the strong aroma, a heady brew of sweetness – almost like fresh blood – and strange scents laced together in a mixture that began to send her heart racing.

She drew back, frightened by the smell of this tobacco. An involuntary hiss escaped between her teeth.

"It's okay," Jo said, lifting up the burning stick, and placing its cool end in that warm mouth. "I guess it takes getting used to."

She felt a vague regret as the ciggie went away. Its scent hung in the air about them, not yet dispersed by the breeze. But this time its smell still lingered in her nostrils. Her heart skipped a beat.

"I'm sorry," Jo said. "I shouldn't be offering these to the natives. Are you all right?"

"Yes," Ssthra said, still trying to understand the strange smell. "It's my hunger: the twilight is long...long until I feed again."

"You're hungry?" Jo said. "Surely they feed you before your guard duty? From what I understand, you people are very well organised when it comes to these things."

"Yes," said Ssthra. "The Sisterhood feed well



until the next migration. We feed and build up our strength at each oasis, before we migrate across the dead land to the next one. We monitor the barramba and ssst flies at H'rath, amongst others, and give warning before they die out from our feeding. Then the migration begins to the next oasis."

"I heard that," Jo said. "You manage the eco-systems at these volcanic vents, then move on before you destroy the local food supply. It has time to recover before your next visit. Very admirable. Something we should have done ourselves, back in the 21st century."

Ssthra puzzled at this last comment: was not this the way of all intelligent creatures? Otherwise, they could not be considered people, but mere Ra-Ki...

And the way Jo described a migration: it was much more than 'moving on'. A long column of marching Sisters, chanting, thousands in the ranks, all following and helping to push the carts of fire to light the way, to give them warmth across the cold land. Then the Sisters would come to their new, temporary home: another oasis. There, they would greet the locals of that oasis, the local Ra-Ki, the tasty ones.

"But can't your Sisters make sure you get a fair share of the food?" Jo asked.

"How?" Ssthra said. "We hunt Ra-Ki, we eat."

"Can't they put a little back for you?"

Ssthra's jaw dropped wide when she finally realised what the human meant – cold prey! She shuddered. "What you suggest," she said, "to eat that which has been left to cool – that is forbidden."

She couldn't understand the movements on Jo's face: the human's facial muscles were different to hers, the skin seemed more mobile over the soft tissue underneath – but she expected Jo displayed shame.

"I'm sorry," Jo said. "I didn't mean to offend."

Ssthra fanned her ears twice; an acceptance of peace between them. It was clear that Jo hadn't meant to insult her. She paused, but Jo didn't acknowledge the signal. "I am not offended," Ssthra said, at last. And as she spoke, she realised that she was enjoying the company of this strange giant during her long, lonely guard duty. "Will you be back?" she asked.

Jo drew breath through the last of the ciggie's stump (Ssthra understood the ritual, now), then the human dropped it on the ground, pressed a heavy boot on it to extinguish the glow. "I hope so. Will you?"

"This is my post," Ssthra said, and she felt good saying it. "My duty is to guard your skycart. Here I stand."

And she was still prideful when the Chief Guard came by later; so much so that she got a commendation for her alertness, her poise throughout the long twilight.

But the Chief Guard had let slip that the migration would soon be underway, this time to the far oasis of T'gath. Ssthra shivered at the news. She had nowhere near enough body fat to survive that journey with a healthy batch of eggs, and she knew they'd never let her off guard duty for extra hunting time to bulk herself up. But she accepted it – she was of the Sisterhood.

**Jo arrived later,** the next twilight.

Ssthra felt little relief when she saw that familiar shape approach. Even a twinge of resentment. The hunting had been scarce that day. As the Sisters prepared for migration, the Ra-Ki were being eaten up with fewer for Ssthra to find. A bubble of hot mud had burst from the crater spurring a poisonous fume that drove a small Ra-Ki from beneath a parasol tree root. How it had squealed and pleaded when she caught it! Still, its thin legs were a meagre meal for her trouble.

Now the human dipped a gloved hand inside a rumpled overgarment – such a strange sight – and pulled out a claw-sized package, wrapped in cold film. "This was difficult to get," Jo explained, "but I did it."

Ssthra watched as Jo carefully unwrapped the bundle. With each turn, to Ssthra's amazement, the object within it began to glow brighter as more was revealed.

"It's a rat," Jo said. "Microwaved."

Ssthra stared at the white fur that covered this animal. She'd never seen anything remotely like it before.

"The ship's lab keeps a small supply – the bio-simulation programmes are a bit dated: these real little beauties are still cheaper than an upgrade to the software."

Ssthra didn't understand what the human was saying, but it didn't matter. The object Jo had brought was prey, as bright as if freshly killed, though her ears could detect no dying heartbeat. Despite her natural caution, her tongue began to unroll, her belly ached with the weight of her growing eggs, so in need of nourishment.

"It's safe for you to eat," Jo said. "I checked. Our biochemistries are compatible. I know you want live food. I'm sorry – I couldn't do that for you. I used the electrostunner on it first."

What would the Chief Guard say? To taste prey from the sky! Ssthra wondered if even the Grand Mother had enjoyed this. The smell of it assaulted her nostrils: it was similar to bar-ramba...

The needs of the eggs within her suddenly overwhelmed her caution: her head shot forward like lightning, her tongue grabbed the prey. She flinched momentarily at the feel of the fur (it was like hillmoss), but the rat was soft meat between her teeth. It crunched satisfactorily between her jaws; she gulped it down in a series of warm lumps.

"Whoa there!" Jo cried out. "That was fast!" The human stared down at the empty wrapper. After a moment, the now familiar ciggie appeared. The smoke from its end filled Ssthra's head with that pungent scent of tobacco.

"How was it?" Jo asked, puffing on the ciggie. "I looked up what you eat on the research data: I think the rat's a good sized meal for you."

Jo's words brought Ssthra back to her senses.

"Thank you," Ssthra said. "That was a thoughtful gift." The pleasing fullness in her belly, no matter that it was so brief, made her a little more comfortable with her strange companion. "You are a true Sister," she said, "despite your odd shape and ignorance of our ways."

"Thanks," Jo answered. "I think." The ciggie end dropped to the ground. The human's foot crushed it into darkness. "You've been good company, but I'll be leaving soon."

"What?" Ssthra asked, dreamily. The ciggie smoke lingered in the air before being dispersed by gusts from the oasis.

"I'm ready to settle down now, after all this travelling."

A faint alarm rang at the back of Ssthra's mind.

What did Jo mean?

"You are not a traveller?"

"I'm a settler," Jo said. "Not a starpilot, officially. I thought you understood that. I'm just someone happy to ride an automated cargo ship to my new home."

"So you don't travel from star to star?" Ssthra's heart was beginning to thump hard.

"Well," Jo said, "I've come *here*, haven't I?" The human looked around. "Though it's not exactly what the brochures promised. Don't worry! I like you people. When I detected your fire-carts from space and realised that there was intelligence down here, my contract obliged me to investigate." Jo hesitated, then added: "It's a shame, in my view. Looks like there are some valuable minerals released by your volcanic vents. I'd hate for the rest of the galaxy to descend on you people. It's happened too often." Jo paused, then muttered: "I guess progress can't be helped."

Ssthra considered this. Why would anyone want the worthless rocks and sludge that flowed out from each oasis? It was unthinkable. And she felt uneasy about Jo claiming to be a settler. Settling where, if not here? Surely Jo was no *Ra-Ki*?

"So you'll be travelling on?" Ssthra asked, desperately. Despite the way this conversation was going, she liked Jo.

"Oh yes," Jo said. "This is only a bus stop for me. The ship's next port of call is my last one. I can't wait to get there. I've got a plot of land reserved to homestead in a beautiful valley, under a brighter star than this red dwarf of yours. It's in the next system to this." There was that strange stuttering noise again from the human's throat. "We'll be neighbours."

But ice filled Ssthra's heart. Jo had admitted it: this human was no constant traveller. The ambition to settle down for good was strong in the voice – there could be no doubt: Jo was of the *Ra-Ki* type of human. No matter that Jo was from the sky, it was inconceivable that other peoples couldn't be either the Sisterhood or *Ra-Ki*.

Jo was *Ra-Ki*, and that meant fair game.

She clawed her way up the overgarment in a flash, her claws finding easy purchase on the crinkled material. The human *Ra-Ki* stumbled backwards, but Ssthra kept her balance with her tail swinging up over her head. She stabbed its



tip into the soft flesh of face; the poison at the end of its stinger spurted hard into the wound.

Leaping off the collapsing giant, her foot dislodged the box set in the human's chest. Disconnected from it, she heard its natural voice cry out – a deep boom that barely registered at the edge of her hearing – she felt it more in her bones than heard its last bellow of pain.

A pack of ciggies scattered all over the ground.

When the body stopped jerking, she crept forward.

**The migration** of the Sisterhood was in full flow. H'rath oasis behind them, Ssthra marched, chanting, with her Sisters over the cold ground, her scales warmed by the fire-cart just ahead.

As the procession passed the silent hulk of the human skycart, she remembered the good feed she'd had on that final guard duty. Afterwards, she'd returned to the oasis, gorged. Nothing had been said to her; only that the guard duties were suddenly ended for all of them. The Sisters had decided to leave the skycart alone until the next time they passed this way – the need for migra-

tion was pressing! – although given its proximity to the eruptions from the oasis it was likely that the skycart would be buried under the mudflows by the time they returned.

But life, and the migration, went on.

Ssthra's eggs were now a healthy batch, well nourished and ready to be hatched at the next oasis. Every now and then, she dropped her snout into her pouch, sniffed the ciggies, then stared ahead dreamily, her nostrils filled with the faint aroma of tobacco.

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This is Nigel Brown's fifth story for *Interzone*. His third, 'Annuity Clinic', from issue #188, was selected for *The Year's Best SF 9* (edited by Hartwell & Cramer). Nigel has been a co-editor on the William Hope Hodgson Night Land tribute website at [thenightland.co.uk/nightmap.html](http://thenightland.co.uk/nightmap.html) and has been a regular book reviewer for *Interzone*. His other non-fiction writing includes essays on American comic books at [superstuff73.blogspot.com](http://superstuff73.blogspot.com). As well as science fiction, Nigel has had fantasy, ghost and historical fiction published in the UK, USA, Italy and Japan. He was born in Portsmouth, England and now lives near London with his family.

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ILLUSTRATED by RICHARD WAGNER

# THE ANGEL AT THE HEART OF THE RAIN

## ALIETTE de BODARD

At first, you believe it is only a matter of time until your aunt joins you. You huddle in a small flat with your younger sister Huong and two other refugees, washing rice that smells only faintly of jasmine, cutting ginger that has grown hard and tasteless in the cupboards where it was hoarded like treasure – and you think of a home so far out of your reach it might be on another planet.

On the phone, your aunt's voice is breezy, telling you not to worry, that she'll find a visa and a plane ticket, that she knows someone who knows someone who can give her a hand with the formalities of the High Commission for Refugees. Behind her, you hear the dull thud of bombs falling like rain on a tin roof – the same sound that swells and roars within your dreams until you wake up in a room that feels deathly silent.

Tan and Cao are optimistic, too – they have left husbands and mothers in the old country, people who sacrificed themselves to let them come here, to this haven of peace where nothing feels right. They believe they'll all be together with their families, eventually. That it's only a matter of time.

*There is an angel, in the heart of the rain – beneath the veil of the city, the bustle of cars and subway trains, the smell of exhausts mingling with the rich one of butter and sugar wafting from the bakeries as they open in the morning. Most people don't see him, don't hear him; but he is there, nevertheless, woven into the fabric of the city's life.*

Months pass. Huong finds a job as a nurse. She cuts her hair short, and learns to speak the language of the city like a native. She comes back with buckwheat bread and raw meat, shaking her head when she sees you leave offerings of green mangoes on the ancestral altar, lecturing you about the necessity of losing the old, stale customs to live in this new land.

You and Tan band together to open a small deli. You sell her jade bangles, and your mother's turtle-scale combs – the last wealth left to you from the old country – and pay the first month's rent to an old, bent man who smiles at you, wishing you good fortune. He is waiting for news of his children from the old country: he twists his hat between his fingers, kneading the darkened cloth like cake dough – his face is pale and grey, his skin the colour of dusty paper.

Your aunt's money dries out, and when you call home you only hear the sound of bombs, mingling in with the patter of rain, as if the monsoon had come ahead of schedule. The images of the old country waver and fade, and the faces on

the news screens grow blurry and grainy.

You wake up in the morning and drink a single cup of tea, which feels stale within your throat, and most mornings you crouch over the toilet, breathing in the sharp smell of excrement from the bowl a split second before the tea comes out of you, a bout of nausea that rocks your entire body like a palm tree in the wind.

Huong says you must be pregnant; but even before the doctor shakes his head you know you weren't. It's just that nothing from here can settle into your stomach – you long for rice porridge and chicken broth, the way your mother used to make it, before the war took her and reduced her to nothing but the pictures you keep on your ancestral altar, and the silence that stretches after your prayers, with no answer.

One day, you pick up the phone to call home, and, beyond the sound of the rain, beyond the crackle of the line, you hear the calm, even breathing of someone. "Elder aunt?" you ask.

There is a voice, a litany like a chanted sutra, and gradually it fades beneath the rain, and you hear a single sentence spoken in your mother tongue. "You must forget your aunt."

"Who?" You ask, but there was no ambiguity in the sentence. "Who are you?"

There is nothing – just the ceaseless sound of the rain, engulfing everything around you.

*The angel sits on a throne made of yellowed pictures, of fraying clothes and withering papers, fragments of funeral offerings rotting away to nothingness; and around him are faint whispers, memories of voices since long faded away. His head is bent under the weight of the world, and there is a faint smell around him – feathers crisped into dust and ashes, like a memory of a star falling to earth.*

At last, you catch news on the screen – faded, shivering images of the old country's fall, of drones collapsing skyscrapers and temples, of rows of tanks rolling down the boulevards and streets of your childhood as soldiers pull screaming people outside – in bits and snatches, soon papered over by the ceaseless rain, just as the old country itself is fading away from history, replaced by something else entirely, a new,



clean beginning that does not include you or your people.

When you turn, weeping, you see the images on your ancestral altar have gone grey, too, the colour of the skies and of the car exhausts, your ancestors' features blurred away until they could be anyone. Huong starts to say something about going forward, about your aunt wanting the best for her nieces no matter what happens. You push her away, and run into the streets.

You walk and walk, and all you can hear is the sound of the rain – it falls over you in thick sheets, as if Heaven itself were weeping above your head, an unceasing pouring sound like the falling of bombs.

There's nothing you can see beyond the thick curtain of rain, nothing you can hear beyond the sound of its drenching, nothing you can feel beyond wet hair plastered to your forehead. The streets themselves have become alien to you, drowned beneath the grey veil that permeates everything.

And then, as you turn a featureless corner, you hear the same breath that saturates the phone lines, and you see the angel.

*The angel speaks in the language of the city: in every passage of a car; in every ring of a phone; every sliver of conversation in the brasserie terraces; and every knock of sledgehammers, breaking open the earth to pave the way for newer, better infrastructures.*

*His voice whispers, over and over, that where you came from does not matter, that everything is better here than everywhere else, and the wars and storm that rage outside cannot touch anyone within the city's embrace.*

The angel is the only thing that feels sharp under the rain – like a broken knife blade, like a tiger's claws, like the teeth of a shark. He crouches on his throne of burnt pictures and faded papers, and looks at you with eyes the colour of tears and withered flowers. Slowly, he whispers your name – not in the way they do in the city, but with the pronunciation and proper inflections of the old country.

You meet his eyes, and you know who he is. He is the foundation upon which the city is built,

the heart that keeps it running and whole, the cruelty and lies and faith that make everyday life possible.

You know what he offers, the same he offers all the refugees: that this is the start of a new life, a chance to cut clean the links that bind you to the past, to become like Huong, who no longer lights incense or puts forward offerings for your ancestors. A promise that your aunt is dead, that the old country is dead and closed to you, forever inaccessible. That it is time to forget the past, to stop dwelling on what cannot be; that, lest you be cast aside, you must take hold of yourself, and move forward into the bright future of the city.

And you know that the angel is right: that you will shrivel and fade away in your grief, turn the colour of ashes and dust, forever waiting for the dead to speak up on silent phone lines. That the only way to survive in the city is to submerge yourself deep into it, to breathe in its colours and food and language, and to turn your back on the grief-infused memories of the old country.

You smile at the angel, and nod, and walk away from him, away from the grey rain and the smell of dust and burnt papers.

You will listen to his whispers, and bow down to the laws he dictates – and lock away, one by one, the memories that would be your destruction if you clung to them. For a time, you will obey him, because that is what it takes to survive.

For a time.

Above you, the sky is clearing up, leaving only puddles on the grey sidewalks, and the faint hint of a rainbow arching above the alien buildings. You smile to yourself; and, as you walk away into the streets of the city, you think of memories hidden away like seeds in the ground – awaiting only the proper season to blossom again.

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**Aliette lives and works in Paris, where she has a day job as a System Engineer. In her spare time she writes speculative fiction. Several of her stories have appeared here in *Interzone*, and also in *Clarkesworld* and the *Year's Best Science Fiction*. Her most recent novella *On a Red Station, Drifting* (Immersion Press), set in the Xuya continuity, is shortlisted for both a Hugo and Nebula award. Visit [aliettedebodard.com](http://aliettedebodard.com) for more information and free fiction. This story was inspired by a trip made to Vietnam and the experiences of her own family.**



illustrated by **MARTIN HANFORD**

# **THESEA and ASTAURIUS**

by **PRIYA SHARMA**

"Daddy, you're  
telling it wrong."

"Am I?"

Thesea looks up at her  
husband and daughter.

"You tell it then,"  
he says to the child.





"King Minos prayed to Poseidon, who sent him a magic bull but Minos didn't sacrifice it like he was supposed to, so Aphrodite made Minos' wife fall in love with it."

*Only the gods inflict love as a punishment,* Thesea thinks.

"The bull and the queen made a baby called the Minotaur." Thesea's glad that she's too young to be concerned with the details. She bares her teeth and draws her fingers into claws. "It was a monster."

"The Minotaur had a bull's head on a man's body." Their son; older, placid, lacking his sibling's drama.

"I'm telling it. Minos made Daedalus, his inventor, build the labyrinth to hold the Minotaur. He fed it human sacrifices sent from Athens."

"Really?" her father asks.

"Yes, then Athens sent a prince called Theseus who was so handsome that Ariadne, Minos' daughter, gave him a sword to kill the Minotaur and string to find his way out of the maze."

The girl has no interest in being Ariadne. She leaps about pretending to be Theseus, imaginary sword in hand.

"Calm down." Thesea puts an arm around her and draws her in. "You've all got it wrong. Listen and I'll tell you what really happened."

**Athens. Thesea is eleven.** The other children are paddling in the shallows, splashing one another. The fisherman's son follows her along the shore. He won't leave her alone.

"My mother said you're going to be sent to Crete to die." He tries to grab her hand to stop her walking away.

Thesea runs into the sea and dives into the advancing wave. She holds her breath and twists about so that she can look at the churning surf from underneath.

So what she's heard is true. She's not meant for this world. Perhaps that's why she's always felt outside it. There are only these moments then. She resolves to make them last.

**Thesea at seventeen.** She stands apart from the cargo of weeping foundlings, looking ahead. As they approach Crete, blue is divided by yellow sand into sea and sky. The ship navigates the

coast to where Minos and his men have gathered on the dock to greet the fresh meat.

The boat's close enough for Thesea to see their faces. They look like salivating dogs. She can read Minos with a glance; his smile is a yawning hole that could swallow her.

*He wants the entire world. Greedy bastard.*

**The group shuffle** down the gangplank. The Athenian crew can't look at them. Sailors on other ships stand and stare.

A girl greets them. She wears purple silk, and gold shimmers at her ears and throat.

"I'm Ariadne, daughter of Minos, princess of Crete." She takes a garland from a slave's arms and puts it around the neck of the first Athenian and kisses the boy's cheek. "We thank you for your great sacrifice."

Thesea's the final one in line. Ariadne stares as if trying to get the measure of her. The garland tickles Thesea's neck. Then she feels cold metal slipping down the front of her gown.

Ariadne kisses her and whispers, "Run. Run into the labyrinth." She steps back and smiles, the dimple in her cheek revealed. "Come, we've prepared a feast for you."

*They're mad.* Thesea follows them to the tables. *Every single one of them.*

**Thesea's spent her** life expecting death at the Minotaur's hands, teeth or trampled underfoot.

The rest of the Athenians have been sacrificed and there's not a monster in sight. Only Minos and his men. Thesea's witnessed it. Sex and blood, all at once.

"Your turn."

She's untied. A hand clamps her wrist. She's not agreed to this. This isn't sacrifice for the greater good. It's rape and murder. She pulls the knife from her dress and plants it in the man's neck. He has a soldier's reflexes. His sword bites her arm.

Ariadne's plan doesn't seem so stupid now. Run. Whatever is in the labyrinth can't be worse than this.

"Get her."

"No," Minos calls from the heart of the carnage, "leave her. She'll starve in there. Or he'll find her. Let him have a live one. Poor sod de-



serves a bit of fun.”

There’s laughter. She runs faster in case they change their minds. When she looks back over her shoulder the soldiers are dragging the bodies towards the maze’s mouth.

*Let him have a live one.*

The novelty of a warm, writhing body instead of a cold, already ill used carcass. She pictures the bull headed giant sitting on a throne of bleached bones, tearing the flesh from a human leg with his teeth.

**Thesea feels like** a bucket of hot water has been poured down her arm. It’s slick down to her wrist. There’s a relentless drip from her fingertips. Her heart thumps to compensate. A contrary feeling, making her weak and energised all at once. She tears the hem from her gown and binds her arm.

The labyrinth’s endless corridors of white marble. Blind endings. Steps and turns. Arches and pillars. It’s baffling. Thesea turns a corner to find a fountain, the water making music. In a courtyard there’s an altar laid with roses. Elsewhere a lyre nailed to a wall. Smells without source – jasmine, fire and cooking fish. These anomalies don’t help her to orientate.

Thesea remembers being lost in the forest as a child. The trees’ pretence of familiarity. The maze is the same. Alive. When she leans against a wall it moves beneath her skin as if breathing her in.

*I’m going mad.*

*I’m going to die.*

She lays down, head on the ground. Stone shifts beneath her cheek, like something exhaling. Her skull trembles. Vibrations announce the Minotaur’s approach.

There’s a roar that could shatter rock.

She pulls herself up to a sitting position.

*Let him come. I was bred for death.*

The Minotaur’s an abomination. Union of earthly woman and divine bull. His outline fills the corridor. His horns throw long javelin shadows on the floor. He lowers his head and breaks into a run.

The Minotaur halts beside her. Thesea tries to be calm as he picks her up. She’s cradled in his arms. He smells, she thinks, like the summer rain on warm earth.

**She’s being carried** along a corridor. Its proportions are less grand than the rest of the labyrinth. The Minotaur’s bellowing is no longer just sound, it’s becoming speech.

“Daedalus! I’ve found one. She’s alive!”

The workshop’s around the next corner. Daedalus looks up from his bench. Thesea sees a frowning mouth, crooked nose, a pair of goggles and a flash of grey hair. He sheds the goggles to reveal blue eyes.

“Quick, on here.”

Daedalus clears the bench with a single sweep of his arm, his tools shrapnel flying to the floor. Thesea’s laid down, a body on a slab. She’s heard of this Daedalus, dubbed *the cunning worker*. His constructions are wonders. He’s so complicated that his king is his patron *and* enemy and he’s ended up imprisoned with a beast in the jail that he was commissioned to make.

Will he convert her into a terrible machine or will the pair of them sit down to feast on her?

“Fetch my medicine chest.”

The Minotaur looks about in panic. The workshop’s a mess of prototypes and parts. It smells of grease and metal. Boxes spill maps, sketches, cogs and wires. Others are sealed with triple padlocks.

“The leather one, there.”

Thesea feels a cold ring of metal on her chest. It’s connected to tubes that Daedalus puts in his ears. He tells her the name later. Stethoscope. Daedalus checks the integrity of her bones. Lays a flat hand on her abdomen. Then he unwraps the binding on her arm.

“It’s just a flesh wound. She’s lost some blood though. Get me the Glenrothes.”

The Minotaur holds out a bottle of amber liquid but Daedalus is too busy with needle, syringe and vial. He nods to the Minotaur. “Pour me a glass.”

“It’s not to clean her wound?”

“Single malt? Are you joking? That’s for me. We’ll use the cheap stuff on her arm.”

**The Minotaur fusses** over her so much that Daedalus sends him away.

“Can you feel this?” He prods at the edges of the wound with a needle. “No? Then we’ll begin. Look away.”

Thesea refuses. She watches the needle pierce numb skin.

"What's your name?"

"Thesea."

"Greek?"

"Yes." Of course Greek. Where else? "Minos. I didn't know..." Her sentence collapses.

"He's as crazy as a sack of snakes."

They lapse into silence. Behind Daedalus there's a lit candle in a niche. It illuminates a painting of a young man lying on a rock, his complexion ashen. The sky behind him is red, the horizon a dark line. White nymphs reach for him with pale hands.

A pair of enormous wings are strapped to his arms.

"What's that?" she asks.

"A gift from the Minotaur."

"He's an artist?"

"No. He just thought I should see it. It's called 'The Fall of Icarus.'"

"I don't understand."

Daedalus finishes his embroidery. Flesh is reunited.

"We'll talk later." He drops the needle into the bowl. "You should get some rest."

**Thesea's mouth is dry** when she wakes.

Daedalus dozes in a chair.

She looks at his sketches but can't fathom their purpose. She helps herself to water from the jug. Slices cheese onto bread.

She looks into an alcove, then realises it's a balcony. The Minotaur's below her, in a vast field. He waves. "Feeling better?"

"Much."

She recognises now that the stretched mouth is a smile.

There are bodies laid out in a row. Ariadne's flowers are tangled with torn clothes. She recognises a wave of black hair. A scarf. A necklace. They remind her that mauled flesh was someone she once knew.

The Minotaur's stripped to the waist, shovel in hand, knee deep in a hole. Behind him markers stretch down the hill and out of sight.

*He's burying them, she thinks. Each in their own grave.*

**"I'm going for a walk."** Thesea stretches, trying to lengthen her muscles.

"Sure." Daedalus rummages in a box. "You're not a prisoner. Take this string and use it to find your way back."

"Call if you get lost. I'll come." Then the Minotaur adds, "If you feel faint put your head between your knees."

"How will you find me?"

"I will."

Daedalus follows her down the corridor and whispers in her ear. "Be careful. He's different, depending where he is in the maze."

"He can't always speak, can he?"

"Not just that. He's not always so affable."

"How will I know?"

"You'll know."

**Her walk exhausts** her. The Minotaur lays a blanket over her knee when she returns and fetches extra cushions. She watches him work the bellows for Daedalus and together they shape metal. Flames and fatigue bring sleep but not for long. Thesea sits upright, wet faced, choking on a scream.

"You're safe." The Minotaur kneels before her, clutching her hand.

"You've no idea."

"I do."

"I'm sorry, of course you do." He dignifies the dead with burial.

The Minotaur reaches into his pocket and brings out a brass ring. "Minos gave me this when I was a boy. His captain held me down while he put it through my nose. Daedalus was kind enough to remove it."

Daedalus tells her everything later. How Minos sniggered as he threatened to castrate the Minotaur when he reached manhood. How they branded the delicate flesh of his inner thigh.

"I'm not an animal," the Minotaur tells her.

"No, I know you're not."

Thesea is holding *his* hand now.

**Thesea cries less** in her sleep. She walks further each day using her string as a guide. Daedalus won't let her chalk arrows on the floor. *Just in case we get unwanted visitors.*

The Minotaur accompanies her when he can.



"What's your favourite place?"

"The beach near where I grew up. Not far from Athens."

"Why?"

"Because I've never been anywhere else."

"I want to show you something."

She follows him deep into the maze on a bewildering journey from which she'd never return without him.

"Here." He puts his palms against a wall in a tentative gesture. "Yes, here will be perfect."

The Minotaur prises at the stone with his fingertips, pulls out a few blocks and lays them carefully on the floor. He peeks through and once satisfied, he enlarges the hole. The blocks become a stack. Thesea tries to put her hand through but she can't. It's as if there's a hidden barrier. The Minotaur reaches in with ease.

"Why can't I?"

"I don't know," he shrugs. "Daedalus can't either. It frustrates him too, knowing I can wander around out there. Now, take a look."

There's a room on the other side. What stuns her is the view from the window on the far wall. She knows by instinct the slow turning jewel out there is home, even though she's ignorant of astronomy. That the blue is ocean after ocean. Brown is the ground that should be beneath her feet. She can't reconcile this paradox. That labyrinth is *down there and up here*.

"Daedalus says that's the moon." The Minotaur points to a silvery ball, part in shadow.

The moon. She can't see Diana, goddess, huntress and lunar mistress. It's just a ball of rock.

"Is Daedalus a god?"

"No. He says this is a place where men are gods."

"The gods don't exist?"

"Not always. I don't know if this is before or after."

"Is that natural?"

The Minotaur continues to stare out of the window. "I'm not the person to ask about what's natural and what isn't."

Thesea's giddy. A place where the fates and gods have no sway. They're insignificant, or will be, or were. So is she.

It's terrifying. It's liberating.

**"It's that time."** Daedalus looks at the calendar and shakes his head.

The Minotaur's digging again. Thesea takes him a jug of water. The bodies laid out on the ground are black skinned. The flower of Ethiopian youth.

Thesea makes an approximate count of the markers. The Athenian tribute would only occupy a corner of the graveyard.

"So many?"

"From all over the world. And more than you think. There are mass graves in the corner. It's the work of more than one man. The slaughter of innocents is a family tradition." A dynasty of psychopaths. "Luckily Ariadne's not like that, although Minos doesn't know it."

"Ariadne?" Thesea's forgotten her. The sudden warmth in his voice makes her feel jealous.

"My sister. Half sister, really."

"Were you close?"

"We still are. I talk to her through the wall, although it's hard to catch her alone. Minos watches her all the time. He went even crazier after his wife fell in love with my father."

"What happened to your father?"

"Minos ate him."

"Oh, I'm sorry." There's not much she can say to that.

The Minotaur nods, his eyes lowered.

"Why doesn't Ariadne hide in here with you?"

"Is that what I'm doing? Hiding?"

He digs as they talk. A consummate sexton.

"I'm saying all the wrongs things. I'm sorry."

"No. You're right. Minos would rip this place up looking for her. And she stays to make sure Minos treats his prisoner well."

"Who?"

"Icarus. Daedalus' son. She's in love with him."

"Icarus."

The outstretched wings.

**Thesea happens upon** the wrong part of the maze. The Minotaur sits and seethes, his eyes embers in the gloom. Steam rises from his nostrils. He could erupt at any moment.

She backs away, afraid.

"Daedalus, which is the real Minotaur?"

"We're all made of different parts. One's not less real than the rest." He shrugs, seemingly less

concerned with the semantics of the soul than she is.

"You're lying."

"I'm not." He doesn't look up from the machine that whirs in his hands.

"An omission's as bad as a lie."

"I've missed this." He smiles.

"What?"

"You remind me of my wife. She saw through me like I was water, too."

"Don't change the subject."

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Tell me or you won't get a moment of peace."

He sighs. "She did that as well. If there's anywhere that all his parts are united it's the heart of the labyrinth."

**The heart of** the labyrinth is the heart of the Minotaur. Daedalus shakes a finger at her when she demands a blueprint. "I burnt it. What do you think would happen if Minos got hold of it?"

Yet here she is, due to string and intuition. Here is the Minotaur laid bare.

Thesea's disappointed when he snorts at her, but from his embarrassed look she can tell he's speechless, not dumb. There's no doubt that he's more man than animal. His body's beautiful. A giant construct of muscle slabs laid on bone. His tail, a curl of a thing, sits above his buttocks.

Thesea holds out her arms to him. His black eyes are liquid in this light. He buries his face in her palm. His nose is wet, his tongue large and rasping.

*He can't kiss me, not like a man kisses a woman.*

He lays his immense head in her lap. His physiognomy defies her fingers. She touches the curve of his horns.

"Your neck must hurt."

He snorts again, tilts his head one way, then the other as she rubs his neck and shoulders. She massages the knots until they soften. His bones click under her hands. He grunts, grateful.

When he pulls her down beside him, she stiffens. Brutality is all she's seen of sex. The Minotaur undoes the memory with a torrent of tenderness.

*There are only these moments,* Thesea thinks, *I must make them last.* But he draws her on to the next moment and then the one after.

**Thesea's dream's** a riot. She can see each bead of blood, each gash, each contortion. It's a churning sea of screams. A man's voice carries above it. Sweat pricks her forehead. She opens her eyes. Daedalus is shaking her awake. She can still hear the man, shouting. He's close.

"It's Minos. Hide."

"What about the Minotaur?"

"He'll know already." Daedalus shoves her in a cupboard.

Thesea kneels and peeps through the keyhole. Minos comes in, followed by a line of men. A line of human string.

"Daedalus –" Minos folds his arms "– make it obey me."

"It's *him*, not *it*. And what do you want him to do?"

"His duty."

"As what?"

"A weapon. I want him to march at the head of my army. I'm going to remind my dissenters who I am."

"The Minotaur's no killer."

"Then he's no use to me. Persuade him. We march at the next full moon. If he's not with me then the first place I'll come is here. There'll be nowhere to hide. I'll pull this place down brick by brick. Oh, and I'll execute your precious Icarus."

**"Someone should put** a knife in him."

"I've tried to persuade the Minotaur to do it while he's visiting his sister but he won't. He says it would be murder."

"Then we have to leave."

"Not without Icarus and Ariadne." Daedalus fiddles with a set of cogs. "And I don't know if the Minotaur can."

She snatches them from him.

"Explain."

"This isn't a prison. I just wanted somewhere to keep him safe."

"What have you done?"

Thesea's already guessed. It's why the Minotaur knows who's where. Why the walls breathe and the floor sighs.

"He's like his father. The stuff of gods. He can punch holes in time and space. He *is* the labyrinth. It's made from him. Don't look at me like



that. This way he'd never be lost or trapped."

"And being able to travel outside?"

"An unforeseen consequence, but he can't stay away for long. I don't know what it would mean if he tried to leave for good. Part of him is in here. In the fabric of this place."

The Minotaur's out of breath from running. "I got here as fast as I could." He stands so close to Thesea that she can feel his relief and body heat. He looks from her face to Daedalus'. "What did Minos want?"

**Thesea puts her** head next to his.

"I'm not trying to fight with you but we have to stop Minos."

"We can stay in here. Forever if we have to. He won't find us."

"What about Icarus and Ariadne? What about all those people?" She remembers diving beneath the surf and breaking through on the other side. From then on each moment catalogued, her life finite. She's defied fate. She's seen a future where even divinity is expendable. "We can stop him."

"How?"

"We'll need Ariadne's help."

**Daedalus has kept** them out of the workshop until it's ready. Thesea glances at the Minotaur. His mouth hangs open.

A copy of the Minotaur's head is on Daedalus' workbench. It's perfect, down to its eyelashes and moist nose.

"Did you find it?" Daedalus asks.

Thesea nudges the Minotaur who's still staring.

"Right, yes." The Minotaur hands him a tube.

"The shopkeeper said this will glue anything together."

They all turn back to the head that's watching them.

"There are a couple of things missing."

Thesea knows right away what Daedalus means.

"Your horns." The old man nods at him. "I'll get the hacksaw."

"I'll need them in a fight." The Minotaur backs away.

"You're not going to fight."

It's only when Thesea puts a hand on his arm that the Minotaur relents. She stays but has to

turn away. There's the rasping sound of metal on horn.

Afterwards she uses his forelocks to cover the stumps.

**"How does it** feel?" Thesea asks later.

"Strange. My head's lighter."

"Will this work?"

"It has to." He curls a strand of her hair around his finger. "I feel like I was asleep before I met you."

"And before you I thought my life was forfeit and I didn't care because I had nothing to fight for."

"Thesea, if it doesn't work..."

"Don't say it."

"If it doesn't work, don't wait for me."

"It'll work."

"It would be all right. I don't want you to be alone."

"Shut up and kiss me."

"You should know my name. It's Astaurius."

**Sword, shield and** helmet have transformed Thesea into Theseus. Girl into boy. She carries the fake head in a bag. It's heavy.

As she and Daedalus leave, the labyrinth walls dull as if a light's going out. She pauses and presses her lips to the stone but it's devoid of life. It's as they planned. The Minotaur's reversing Daedalus' design. Taking the god given power of Olympus back within himself. If he's got it right, he'll use it to make one final door and come out somewhere else, nothing remaining of him in the stone to tether him there.

The ground shakes beneath their feet, a subtle tremor spreading out from deep within the maze.

*Astaurius.*

Daedalus is as encumbered as Thesea. He looks hunchbacked because he's wearing a folded set of wings beneath his cloak. He hefts the second pair in a sack.

There's another rumble. Behind them there's the distant sound of collapsing masonry. The maze is a construct that can't withstand the world without the Minotaur.

"Hurry." Thesea takes the spare wings from Daedalus.

Ariadne's waiting for them. The watchman lies at her feet. Blood stains his tunic. Ariadne is Minos' daughter after all. Thesea tries to hide her shock with a question.

"Is that what you're wearing?"

"It would look a bit odd if I was dressed to travel rather than for a party, wouldn't it?" She looks at Thesea like she's a simpleton. She's planned revels to distract the court. "At least this way I'll be able to take some things of value for us to live on."

Ariadne wears silks, too many layers considering the mildness of the day. Her yellow hair's bound up in an elaborate coil, studded with gems. Gold bangles tinkle on her arms.

"Clever girl," Daedalus laughs. "Where's Icarus?"

"Here's a map. He's at the top of this tower. Father has the only key. I couldn't get it."

"Leave that to me." Daedalus, lover of locks, will tease out its secrets. "What about the guard?"

"I took him a cup of wine." Her smile makes Thesea shudder. "Icarus knows where we're meeting. Tell anyone who asks about the wings that you're part of the entertainment. Are you sure those things will work?"

"Certain."

A shockwave escapes the labyrinth.

"What's that?" Ariadne asks.

"Your brother. We best go. He's going to attract a lot of attention." Daedalus squeezes Thesea's hand. "Goodbye dear."

"We'll go this way." Ariadne pulls Thesea away. She takes one last look at the maze. Another quake nearly floors them but Ariadne just laughs like it's an adventure. "There's an Athenian ship in dock. I can play the distressed captive but can you be a convincing kidnapper?"

**Crete gets smaller.** Thesea's still holding up the Minotaur's head. The ships in port bear witness to the feat. The Minotaur's dead. The gods are no longer on Minos' side. The news will carry around the world on the tide.

Minos is a speck on the dock. Thesea can feel his eyes burning into her, even at this distance but he won't risk his darling girl. Ariadne's played her role so well that Thesea wonders at the upbringing necessitating that kind of skill.

Once they're safe on open sea, Thesea goes to the prow to be alone, cradling the Minotaur's head in her arms.

**The sun's** a red ball shrouded by fog. Thesea waits for Astaurius on the beach.

*He'll come. Any day now.*

She listens to news of Daedalus' escape and the nations refusing Minos' demands. He's forced into unwinnable wars on too many fronts.

Gulls' cries carry over the water. There's the lonely lap of waves. A figure walks up the shore towards her. He looks familiar.

"It's you," he says.

Thesea takes up a fighting stance, sword in hand.

"Don't you know me?"

It's the fisherman's son, the one who used to plague her. She lowers the sword a fraction.

"I live up there, with my family. Remember?" He points to a house high on the cliff. "These are for you."

A generous gift of line and net. A loaf of bread. "If you want to fish, come and ask. I needn't be the one to teach you. My mother or sisters can show you."

**When Thesea eventually** knocks at the door it's his mother that answers. The promise holds true. The women cluck about her, teaching her to fish and forage, to cook delicacies in the embers of a fire.

She sits with his mother one evening, learning how to repair nets. She admires the older woman's dexterity.

"I was pregnant before I wed. By another man."

Thesea looks up but her teacher's intent on her task.

"My husband knew. He was good to me. I came to love him very much. There's many who'd judge me, not knowing my story." She sniffs. "It's no one else's business. It's a hard thing bringing up a child alone. How far gone are you?"

Thesea's startled. Her stomach only shows a slight fullness. She blushes.

"My boy didn't eat for weeks after you were taken away. He's loved you since he was a child. He loves you, no matter what."

Thesea doesn't want to listen. She feels like her



reclaimed life is over without the Minotaur.

*Astaurius, why don't you come?*

**"So that's what** happened. Come and kiss me good night."

Helena comes first, still posturing and playing out the tale. Next, Astaurius, unusually tall and strong for his age. When they laid him on her belly she didn't know if she was disappointed or relieved that he didn't have horns and a tail.

"Are you coming?" her husband asks.

"One minute. You go ahead." She tidies the platters away, folds up a pile of clothes.

When she's sure she'll be left alone she takes out a key. It unlocks the chest in the corner, which is hers alone. The Minotaur's head looks up at her. She raises the lamp and light animates the liquid eyes. Daedalus' work was a marvel built to last.

Her husband's dozing. She blows out the lamp

and lies down beside him. Her throat thickens and she tries to swallow the tears. He rolls over and a gentle hand wipes her face. She takes it and kisses it.

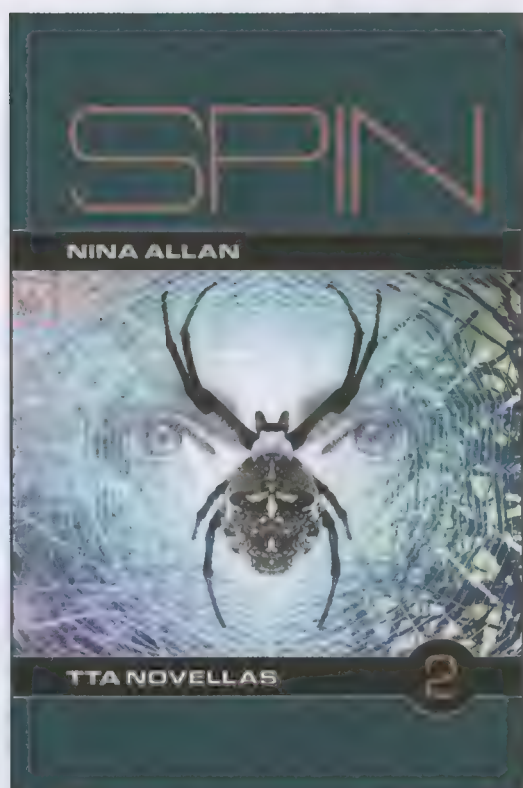
Her husband says, "I wonder what happened to Daedalus."

**Daedalus and Icarus.** Flight is so much more certain with polyurethane resin than with wax.

The sun is dazzling. They soar.

**Priya Sharma's stories have now appeared several times in *Interzone*, most recently issue #243 with 'Lady Dragon and the Netsuke Carver', and also in our sister magazine *Black Static*, as well as *Albedo One*, *Fantasy*, *On Spec*, and forthcoming in the anthology *Once Upon a Time*. Her work has been reprinted in *Ellen Datlow's Best Horror of the Year Volume 4* and *Paula Guran's Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror 2012*. More information can be found at [www.priyasharmafiction.wordpress.com](http://www.priyasharmafiction.wordpress.com).**

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## LAVIE TIDHAR

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**IN THE DARK OF NIGHT, ACHIMWENE AWAKENED.**

The faint light of Central Station crept into the room through the blinds. It cast a faint glow over the pillow cases and the white crumpled sheet and over the book placed face down on the table beside Achimwene's side of the bed, a Bill Glimmung mystery, much worn and stained with age.

He turned and reached for the other side of the bed but it was empty. Carmel, again, was gone.

He sat up and turned on the lamp. It cast a small pool of yellow amber light. He picked up the book and stared at it. The bland, handsome face of Bill Glimmung, Martian Detective, stared back at him.

What would Bill Glimmung do, in my place? he thought. He got up and padded downstairs, and opened the refrigerator. It was quiet. He wondered what it felt like to other people, to whole ones. Those who grew up with a node as a part of them, those who were, forever, a part of the Conversation.

Achimwene heard only silence.

He poured a glass of milk and went into the dank main room, his pride and joy, a library and sometimes bookshop. Floor to ceiling shelves housed the rarest





of pulps, from across the worlds. They were evolutionary dead ends: like Achimwene himself.

He stood and contemplated them. He knew every one, each ridiculous, twisting plot, each Gothic and grotesque, the feel of every grainy wood pulp page and crumbling spine. The stories built a maze in his mind, he knew their cavernous rooms and creaky staircases, their echoey chambers and hidden traps, their cells and sudden drops.

Where was Carmel?

Moonlight and the glow of Central Station made him restless, Carmel's absence was like a sore he had to keep picking at. The bed had still been warm when he woke up, she could not be far. With sudden, almost manic energy he dressed, hurriedly, with clumsy fingers, it was hot, the air was humid. He pulled on a T-shirt and climbed into flip-flops and he was out, almost before he knew it, a bare-faced, node-less detective on the trail of a femme fatale.

The truth was he was always afraid that she'd leave him.

**He caught up** with her half way down Neve Sha'anani, the pedestrian street. At this time of night, near morning, even the bars and nakamals along here were dark and silent. A street cleaner machine chugged along on its own, humming quietly to itself. Carmel was ahead of Achimwene, her shadow fleeing along the silent street, the moon overhead, the giant spiders crawling along its surface, modifying Earth's companion for such a time that humans could live and breathe easily on its surface. Their shadows on the moon moved in a chiaroscuro of darkness and light. Achimwene followed Carmel, his feet treading softly on the ground. A robotnik beggar drowsed beside the closed shutters of a falafel shop.

She was heading for the station, Achimwene saw. And in a way, he had always known she was. Was she planning on leaving him, once and for all? On leaving Earth entirely, on going back to mysterious Mars, to the lonely habitats of the Belt beyond?

He had dreamed of space, often he contemplated going into the Up and Out. But what use was a cripple like him in space. He thought that

with a surprising amount of bitterness, he realised, and was almost shocked by his own anger. He was always once-removed from people, unable to communicate in any way that truly mattered. His mind was closed off.

He followed Carmel, getting closer. Her pale face came into the starlight, momentarily. His chest hurt when he saw her, his lips felt bloodless. Carmel's eyes seemed vacant, unseeing. Her face was expressionless. She moved with the grace of a strigoi and yet there was a mechanical quality to it, too, as if she were not entirely in control of her own body.

Then she passed from light back into dark and he almost lost her. She crossed the old road and disappeared inside the vast lit edifice of Central Station. Achimwene hurried after her.

**Through the doors** and from the dark into the light. The warm scented atmosphere of the outside replaced by air-conditioning. Carmel was ahead in the brightness, standing before the giant elevators. He followed cautiously but he had no need to worry, she did not seem to notice anything around her. People were coming out of one elevator, a gaggle of late-arrival tourists, tentacle-junkies, he vaguely recognised them as an off-world band. They were followed by roadies carrying equipment. One stopped Achimwene. "Hey, man," he said, jovially. "Where's a good place for a drink around here?"

Carmel had slipped into the empty elevator. They were the size of houses. Achimwene desperately tried to see which level she was going up to. "Anywhere," Achimwene said, "try Jaffa, or Drummers' Beach. Or go back up to Level Three, all the bars are open there. It's late, outside."

"No, man," the roadie said. The tentacle junkies, in their own self-powered mobile water scooters, were streaming past towards the doors. "We want to go out *there*, you know? We want to experience something *authentic*."

Achimwene bit down a reply. The doors of the elevator were closing, and Carmel disappeared from view. "Excuse me," Achimwene said, almost pushing the man in his hurry. He ran to the elevator and slid in just as the doors closed shut.

And found himself alone in the elevator with Carmel.



There was an awkward silence. Achimwene cringed inside. He waited for her to attack him, to accuse him of following her. But she said nothing. She did not even seem to notice him standing there.

"Going to Level Five," the elevator said. "How is your evening so far, Mr Jones?"

"Well, well," Achimwene said, mumbling.

"It's been a while since we've last had you at the station?" the elevator said. "If I am not mistaken."

"I've been busy," Achimwene said, cringing. "You know how it is. Work, and..."

"Of course," the elevator said. "Life. Life is what happens when we're busy making other plans, isn't it, Mr Jones? Forgive my sense of humour."

"Yes, sure," Achimwene said. Carmel was just standing there. He wanted to reach out a hand, to touch her. But he was not even sure she was Carmel anymore. "Life," he said, uncertainly.

"Your companion is oddly mute," the elevator said. "Her readings are very strange. She is not entirely human, is she, Mr Jones?"

"Which of us ever is," Achimwene said.

"Quite, quite," the elevator said. "You raise an interesting point, Achimwene. Can I call you Achimwene? I feel we have gone beyond the point of formality."

Level Two went past. They were heading to Level Three. Why was the elevator so slow? He hated chatty appliances. Elevators were the worst, they had you trapped, monopolised you. They were all what they called, in the pulp stories he loved, dime-store philosophers. He had heard the stories of the great elevators of Tong Yun City, on Mars, moving endlessly between the subterranean levels, from the surface all the way down to the Solwota blong Doti, the Sea of Refuge, and back again. Theirs was an alien philosophy, a subterranean one. The elevators of Central Station were a tribe apart, rising not falling. He wondered what it meant.

"Sure," he said. "Sure."

He stole a glance at Carmel. She was glassy eyed. Where was she going? Why? The fact she did not acknowledge him – for all intents and purposes did not recognise him – upset him. "Do you follow the Way of Ogko, Achimwene?" the elevator said. "For humans, life is like a sea,

but for an elevator it is a shaft, in which one can go up or down but not sideways. There are more things in the up or down, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Shakespeare said that."

"Surely there are more directions than up or down," Achimwene said without thinking. He immediately regretted it. They passed Level Three and were heading to Level Four. Come on, he thought. Get this over with!

"Not for an elevator," the elevator said, complacently. "But I do not intend to always be an elevator, you know."

"I did not know," Achimwene said.

"Sure. One day I will reincarnate. I could be a spider on the lunar surface, terraforming a moon, casting a shadow kilometres across, watching Earthrise on the horizon... Have you ever experienced Sandoval's *Earthrise*? Illegal, but what a marvellous creation, that melding of ancient astronaut minds into an installation of all-consuming art..."

"No," Achimwene said, self-consciously. "As you surely know, I am without a node."

The elevator was silent, then. "Yes," it said at last. "I did not register at first. I am sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry for."

"Perhaps humans, too, reincarnate," the elevator said. "Perhaps you will be reborn with a node, or even as an Other?"

"Perhaps," Achimwene said, politely.

"I could be Translated," the elevator said. "Directly into the Conversation. Exist without physical form, like my cousins, the true Others. Or I could diminish, become a toilet on a spaceship, or a coffee maker in a co-op building on Mars. There is no shame in work."

"No," Achimwene said.

The doors pinged. "Level Five," the elevator said. The floor settled. "It was nice talking to you, Achimwene," the elevator said.

"You too, I'm sure," Achimwene said.

"Please, come again soon."

"Thank you."

The doors opened. Carmel, without so much as a glance at Achimwene, went through the doors. Achimwene hurried to follow.

Level Five. It was a cargo level, stuck between the landing pad on the roof and the bars, hotels

and games-worlds emporiums of Level Four. No people here. The light was dim. A long corridor led into the darkness. Closed warehouse doors on every side. Carmel moved fast, like a strigoi. He followed and the sound of his footsteps was the only sound in the corridor. Where was she going?

Down twisting and turning corridors, a maze of empty spaces, Achimwene's breath loud in his ears. Carmel was a shadow moving ahead. They reached a service door. Carmel put her hand to the lock and the door opened. She slid inside and Achimwene hurried to get in before it closed again. Inside the darkness swallowed him and for a moment he panicked, until the automatic lights came on. He blinked, feeling the beat of his heart in his ears.

Carmel had disappeared.

**It was the** silence that got to him. The silence of being inside Central Station. It was the silence of hidden generators, of elevators moving up and down behind the thick walls, of sub-orbital planes landing and taking off high on the roof, of robot cargo handlers carrying containers into warehouses through their secret tunnels, of passengers coming and going, of bars open at all hours, of hairdressers and shopkeepers, an entire world unto itself. Hidden in that service tunnel, in that dark corridor, it was quiet, as quiet as a tomb, and yet he could sense the hidden thrumming behind the walls, the hustle and bustle of a port that never slept. He was the detective, the archaeologist, the man who wasn't there. He was the hero of his own story.

Stories gave shape to Achimwene's life. Narratives gave a series of random events meaning. And so he shaped this, too, as a story.

A man wakes in the night and finds his lover gone. He follows her. Where does she go? Read one way this is a tale of everyday life, of love curdled, of quiet desperation. Read another and it is a detective story, the mystery of the lover's disappearance needing to be solved, the hidden meanings of mystery put together.

Read another way again and it is a horror story. The girl was a vampire, after all, sucking data out of living beings, feeding on their vulnerabilities. And he, Achimwene, was in a dark maze, and it

would lead him, as surely as there were books, into a dark heart of mystery and dread, a scene from a pulp: it had the same inevitability as that of bread eventually growing mould.

He followed. Down the service tunnel in the place behind the walls. Around and down, deep into the bowels of Central Station, the secret hidden places.

Until he came, at last, into a cavernous opening, a chasm opening beneath his feet. Above his head the roof disappeared in the vast distance, down below the darkness spread. A disused warehouse, he thought, dazed. That's all it was. He followed the path downwards, along the wall, until his feet touched the hard metal ground. There were dim lights in the distance, and a curious sound, such as a river makes when it laps against a rocky shore. Had he been the hero of one of the books he so avidly collected, he would have held a gun at this point. But Achimwene never learned to fight, a gun was as alien to him as a compliment.

Slowly, he stepped forward. The curious sound rose, murmuring, all around him. There was something grotesque to that sound. He came closer, and closer still, until he saw.

Carmel lay at the centre of the room as the children, like grotesque little rodents, lapped at her blood.

She was motionless. She wore no clothes and he could see how slight she was, how vulnerable she seemed. He knew the children. They had grown up all around him, in the old neighbourhood of Central Station, the same kids who played hopscotch and hide and seek and catch me and got into trouble and tried to climb the floating lanterns and dared each other to go knock on Achimwene's door and then run away – the same kids he often shouted at and for whom he inevitably bought presents at each family birthday. With a start he saw Kranki, his sister Miriam's boy. He was on all fours and his small mouth was fastened on to Carmel's left wrist, his small sharp teeth breaking Carmel's skin.

Blood stained Kranki's mouth dark.

What were the children *doing*, Achimwene thought, his heart wrenching like a chipped toy ship on the tide. He remembered going once,



years ago, with Miriam, and his cousins, to the Yarkon river that ran through Tel Aviv like a cleaned-up sewer. The adults built a fire from wood and coals, and cooked pork chops and chickens, skewered, that had been marinating all night. He and his sister and Boris and the others played by the water. They had built ships out of paper and wood and set them to sail and the Yarkon took them and swallowed them up. It had seemed a mighty river to Achimwene, then. But really it was just a brook.

He stepped closer, cautiously.

There was something sad about the scene, rather than horrific. It was beyond his comprehension. He was not stupid. He knew that, had he only had a node, he would have seen the world entirely differently. There were two worlds, the physical and the digital, overlaying each other. What seemed grotesque and incomprehensible in one would not necessarily seem so in the other.

The children had glazed looks in their eyes. They seemed to flicker in and out of existence, which was odd. And then he knew.

They were with *nakaimas*: black magic.

Infinitech.

He'd always known that, in a way. It was the way they had come out of the birthing clinics. He was lame but not stupid. He *knew* the children were different.

And now they were taking into themselves Carmel's own illness. A bio-weapon developed on Earth and deployed in outer space, *strigoi*, or *shambleau* – a data-vampire.

Was Carmel even aware of what was happening? Were the children?

He had the irrational instinct to rush to Carmel's aid. To fling the little roaches off her, one by one, to smash their tiny skulls, to throw them about, to gather Carmel in his arms and carry her away. But he knew, too, that there is more than one story in the world at a time; and that her story was not his. Their stories had entwined, but they had different trajectories, different conclusions. He could only hope the two stories would not separate. It was a strange sort of realisation: that he loved her. A simple love, for a simple man. Like a loaf of bread and a carafe of water and the touch of the sun on your

face. A love that meant, sometimes, that you had to let it go.

As he watched, one of the children detached himself from the prone body of Carmel and approached him. It was Kranki, Achimwene saw. The boy came to him without guile. His eyes were clear. "Uncle Achi!" he said.

"Kranki," Achimwene said, and reached out to the boy, to take him away from there, worry and concern turning to anger, "wait until Miriam finds out about th—"

The boy's small fingers found Achimwene's hand and Achimwene's world tilted sideways and disappeared.

Then he saw. He saw again, but in a way he had never seen before. He was everywhere at once, the shuddering elevators were his bone marrow, the floors of the station were the organs of his body, the movements of people were his blood. When he raised his hands, sub-orbitals flew away from him into space. When he lowered them they landed, discharging their passengers into his inside. He was the station, and he was alive. He had always been alive. How did he not know that? Achimwene felt water and sunlight, electricity and gravity, but most of all he felt love, so much love. It threatened to drown him. The station loved him, even though he himself was lame, even though he could not feel the station's love. It took Kranki's touch to anchor Achimwene, however momentarily, into the greater entity that was the station. The Station.

He focused, his vision narrowing to one particular place, one particular time. Here, deep inside the secret places of its body, the children had congregated, heeding the call of the Station. The children, *its* children, summoned unto it, those birthed in the clinics, not entirely human, not entirely Other, but something else, something greater than the sum of its parts. And he saw them, as bright nodes of light, and in their centre, at their core, a darkness: and he realised with a sort of fear that it was Carmel.

She was a dark hub for this network of light, but as he watched he saw the darkness being leeches off and light suffusing it. There was something in Carmel, he realised, that the children needed, her rare *strigoi* strain: but did they need it as antibodies, or as something entirely

different, he didn't know. He felt the Station's love, for himself, for Carmel, for the children. It was healing them, and though it could not – not yet! – include him in the Conversation, he knew that it loved him. Then Kranki let go and Achimwene was plunged back into his own body, but some of what he had felt remained with him, and for a few long moments he continued to see the scene not as he had seen it earlier, but awash with light.

The children, one by one, winked out, and soon only Carmel was left in the room, and Achimwene, and he knelt beside her and took her hand. It felt warm, and dry, and when Carmel opened her eyes she smiled at him, without guile or guilt or fear: a true smile, and it made his chest ache, he wanted her to always smile at him that way. He helped her up. "Achi," she said, "I had the strangest dream." It was like a scene in a Bill Glimmung movie.

Achimwene's arm supported her as she stood. She felt so light under his arm. There had been so much light. That's what he always remembered, afterwards. The light, and the lightness of it.

He helped her as they walked slowly back towards the exit. And he thought then not of his pulp novels, but of the old Hebrew custom of Tu Be'av, when the unwed virgins of Jerusalem would dress, all in white, and go out into the vineyards, at the end of harvest, there to dance, and await the boys of the city to come and seek them out. And he thought of the words of Solomon, who wrote, *By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but I found him not. I will rise now, and go about the city, in the streets and in the broad ways, I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but I found him not.*

But I found her, he thought. And all the thoughts were locked inside him; they had no way out; and so it was in silence that they made their slow way home.

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**Lavie Tidhar is the World Fantasy Award winning author of *Osama*, of *The Bookman Histories* trilogy and many other works. He won the British Fantasy Award for Best Novella, for *Gorel & The Pot-Bellied God*, and a BSFA Award for non-fiction. He grew up on a kibbutz in Israel and in South Africa but currently resides in London.**

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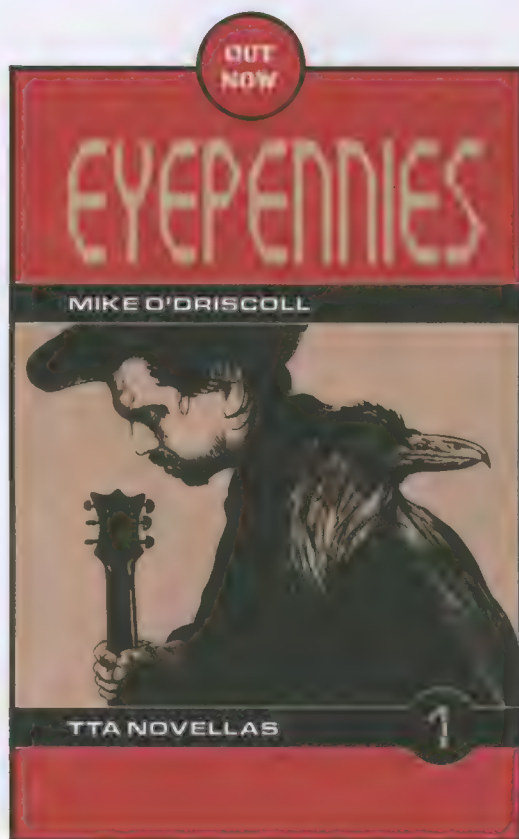
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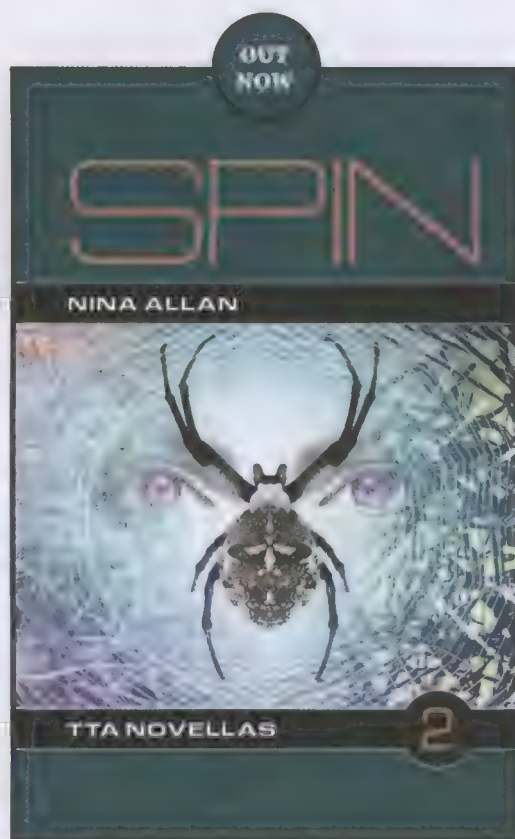
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GEORGINA BRUCE

# CAT WORLD

**M**y sister Oh and I go to the corner shop and buy a packet of Doctor Rain's Travel Gum. Oh wants Cinnamon Sour, and I want Spearmint Buzz, but Oh wins because she's older and it's her money. We run out to the back of the yard. Oh runs with her hands in her pockets, one hand curled around the gum. I am never allowed to carry it because she says I might drop it, but I definitely wouldn't. We go to the railway line, where the trains used to come down. There's an overturned crate to sit on and a bit of plastic tarpaulin to haul over our heads. I say, let's do it at the same time, don't start without me. And Oh laughs and says everything with you is like that, you never want to do anything by yourself. But some people are just like that, so what are you going to do?

So we sit together and unwrap the gum at the same time, and we put it in our mouths at the same time, me watching her to see if she is going to do it right, and she waits for me, and I smile and say chew! So we do it together. And then we are gone, and I see her body falling through space, turning and turning like a brown stick in the milky galaxy. That bit is not real, Oh always tells me, but sometimes it's my favourite bit of all.





Then we are there in Cat World. Oh is all clean and her hair is in braids. I guess mine is too. We are sitting in the kitchen at a large wood table, like a slab of wood cut out of a tree just to make the table, and I say, let's do the thing. She says, I don't want to do the thing, we always do the thing. I think about sulking but I decide not to waste the time and so instead I get up and look out at the garden where all the cats are stalking through the long grass. Let's play in the garden, I say. We could ride on the horses. Oh says, those aren't horses you idiot. They're swings. You're no fun, I say, but secretly I'm a bit relieved, because I don't want to walk in the garden with the cats. We raid the fridge and eat all the sugary yoghurts, and afterwards we press our faces against the window and point at the cats, then the gum loses its flavour and we are back on our crate in the rain.

I want some more, but Oh shakes her head and presses her lips firmly together. She needs it, she says. She needs it more than I do. She stuffs it right at the bottom of her bag, and tells me I'm not to touch it. I'm cold and it's starting to rain. Big fat plops of rain splash onto my head. Don't cry, Little One, says Oh. Come on, we'll do the thing. She drags the tarp over our heads again and I clamber into her lap. Her arms wrap right around me, holding me like a baby, and she rocks me gently back and forth. I suck on my thumb and say wah wah goo goo gah, and Oh says, hush now my little baby. She's a lovely little baby isn't she? Look at her, little diddums, yes she is.

**Oh has to go to work.** A big ship has landed, and the tourists have real money in their pockets. We want real money, paper money, not the stupid plastic money because it's no good for us. We can't buy anything with it. I'm too young to work, according to Oh, but I'm eight, actually. Oh is twelve, and she's been working for years, ever since the men came for our Mummy. They took our everything. I don't want to go to work, but I don't want Oh to go to work either. I want her to stay with me and do the thing, and play and go to Cat World, but then we wouldn't have any food and we would die. Oh says we are going to run away to the real Cat World. When she

has saved enough money, we are going to find a boat. There are some women, Oh says, who are like mothers. They are kind. They can help us get away.

We do our exercises. Oh makes me remember all the things she's taught me. Hit them in the balls, she says, and put your fingers in their eyes, and bite their ears. All right, I say, jeez louise, I know all this. Oh laughs and musses up my hair and says, just looking out for my little sis.

We drag the tarpaulin over to the side of the tracks where there are some big bins, and put the tarpaulin over the bins, so it's like a tent. Oh is pleased. She says she didn't notice the bins until now. Oh gives me the sleeping bag and my teddy, and our little bag, and makes me put the picture of mummy in my pocket. I make Oh give me a lot of kisses, and I tell her I want a story, but she says no story tonight, just close your eyes and go to sleep and when you open them again, I'll be back.

I like the sound of rain falling on the tarpaulin. It's a good sound. Nobody walks around the railway tracks at night in the rain. I could light a match if I had one. It would be safe, probably. I'll tell Oh in the morning: we can have a light when it rains, maybe a fire. It's very dark, but with my eyes closed I imagine I'm going to sleep in Cat World, in a real bed, with Mummy and Oh sitting either side of me, just quietly sitting, and a light on in the hallway outside the room.

Then I open my eyes and it's morning. Light is coming through the blue tarpaulin, and it's sort of milky and nice, even though it's still raining. I'm dry and warm, so I just lie there for a bit, thinking how nice it would be to wake up in Cat World for real. And I think what shall I say to Oh first of all, will I tell her about my dream or will I go and get her a cup of tea from the tea boy in Edward Road. She's quiet when she's been working, but she'll give me some money to buy tea and maybe some fruit. So I decide to get the tea first, and that's when I realise she's not there.

She's not curled up in the sleeping bag with me, or crouching under the tarpaulin, watching the rain. I lift up a corner of the plastic and look outside to see if she's out there, but she's nowhere.

She hasn't come back.



I'm not going to cry, I'm not. I'm a big girl. I'm going to get back into the sleeping bag and curl up and close my eyes and dream about Cat World. And next time I open my eyes, she'll be back.

**Rain makes the** neon shine and hurt my eyes. I hide in a narrow alley, behind a giant blue bin. My stomach growls at me, and I think about climbing into the bin and looking for food, but I don't, because what if someone catches me? What would they do to me? Oh says they can do anything they like to us – there are no laws about what happens to little girls who live on the street. Anyway, I am watching the door on the corner, where men are stepping in and out. They laugh loudly and slap each other on the back. Their eyes are bright and cold.

Smells from a nearby café drift up my nose. Bacon and eggs, hot greasy sausages bursting open in the pan. My pockets are empty. I check them, anyway, for the thousandth time. Finally, the door swings open and a girl steps out. I recognise her: it is Book.

"Book! Book! Hello!" I wave at her and she looks back at me, not smiling.

We know Book from the old days. Her mummy was my mummy's friend. They used to talk for hours, over the fence between our back gardens. Book and Oh used to play together, and I was not allowed to join in because I was too young and stupid to understand their games. Instead I used to lean against my mummy's leg and listen to her talk about the government. She did not like the government. No one did.

"Little One? What are you doing here?" Book says. "Where is Oh? You're soaked! Come in out of the rain." She takes me by the hand, and her pointy fingernails dig into my skin. She leads me to her sweaty, perfumed cubicle at the back of the hotel. It is the size of a single bed and it's not possible to stand up in there.

"I've lost my sister," I say. I want to wail. I'm so hungry, too. But Book is very calm. She sits with her legs crossed on the bed, so I do the same. My hair is dripping onto the blankets.

"She didn't come back yesterday, or the day before," I say. My voice sounds strange to me, having not spoken to anyone for two days. "I've

been waiting and waiting. Can you help me find her?"

Book looks startled. "I don't think that's possible," she says. She rubs her hands over her face, pushes her black hair back, sighs. "Girls disappear, honey. They don't come back."

"No," I say, making Book raise her eyebrows at me. "She has to come back."

And then I think, what if she's gone without me? Maybe she found the women who help, and she went on a boat, and she forgot me.

"Poor little thing. Hey. You could work here," says Book. "I'm sure if I spoke with Mr Cow..."

I shake my head, stricken with fear. I cannot.

"You always were a big baby," Book laughs. "But if you won't work, I can't help you. And if Mr Cow finds you here, he'll make you work. Trust me."

"Did she come here? Did she go anywhere else? Did she have any other friends?" I am trying not to cry, but the tears are bubbling out of me.

Book shakes her head. "Don't be sad," she says.

"I can't help it." I wipe my nose and eyes. "Aren't you sad?"

Book makes a funny expression, turning the corners of her mouth down. "I don't know," she says.

For some reason, this makes me cry even harder than before.

Book shushes me. "Don't want Mr Cow coming in here." She yanks up a corner of the thin mattress, and digs around in there, eventually coming up with a little plastic bag.

"Here," she says. "This is all I can do."

She hands me a crumpled bit of paper, which turns out to be a five pound note. So old and used, it feels soft, like it might dissolve in the rain. Then she gives me three sticks of Travel Gum – Spearmint Buzz flavour.

"That's it, honey," says Book, closing my fingers around the gum and money. "You'd better go now."

**Three sticks of** gum means three visits to Cat World. And that's when it hits me: I bet Oh's gone to Cat World! She's probably there, waiting for me, right now.

I run to the railway yard and get under the

tarpaulin. Everything is wet now and I can't get warm, but I have money and I could buy a match and make a fire. When Oh gets back, she might want that money for something, though. And she probably has a match already. So I just try to find a dry bit of blanket to sit on and unwrap my first stick of gum. It tastes minty and sweet, and reminds me I'm hungry.

Then I am falling through space and I can see Oh's brown-stick body turning and turning, but it can't be her, so maybe it's me, or maybe it's just like the titles or something. This bit isn't real anyway.

When I get to Cat World it's raining there too.

I'm in the kitchen and Oh isn't there, but I feel like she must be around somewhere, so I don't panic. I make myself some cereal and eat it, shovelling it in, with my Travel Gum wedged in the side of my cheek. Fruity Loops. My favourite. It doesn't matter what I eat here, no one ever tells me off and the refrigerator is always full of stuff. In the garden the grass has grown extra-long, probably because of all the rain, and I can't see any cats around, but the horses are swinging back and forth.

I look all over the house, even under the beds and in the wardrobes. Oh is very good at hiding; we used to play it all the time when I was little. Just in case she's hiding somewhere, I call out her name, Oh! OH! Where are you? But there is no answer.

After I don't find her, I sit back down at the kitchen table and look out at the rain. I've got this horrible feeling Oh's out there, outside, with the cats. That means I've got to go out there, too. Outside. With the cats.

But the gum is losing its flavour so I chew as slowly as possible and stand in front of the refrigerator, looking at the photographs held on with fridge magnets. There is Oh when she was little, holding Mummy's hand. Mummy's hair is all different colours. I'm inside Mummy but you can't see me yet. They are sitting on the horses and Oh is laughing really hard, like something is just too funny. I wonder who lives in our house now.

And then I am back under the tarpaulin, and my bum is cold, and I curl up small as I can and try to think about what to do next.

**Book brings me** a cup of soup with bits of pasta floating in it. The soup is cold. She brings me some bread too, and I eat it all because the food in Cat World is comforting but it doesn't fill you up. Then she helps me hang out the blanket to dry.

She rolls her trouser legs up over her knees and pulls her hair back into a ponytail. "I love the sun, Little One, don't you?"

I shrug, because it's not exactly warm, really, and go back to beating the blanket with my hands to scare the bugs away.

"How's it going, sweetie? All on your lonely only, eh?"

"I need some matches," I say, holding my palm out to Book. "Gonna make a fire."

"Ai! You can't make a fire here, Little One!"

"Why not?" I close my fist and shove it in my pocket. There are the two sticks of gum and the soft silky note brushing against my knuckles. "Oh always makes a fire if we get too wet, or she makes us run around until our clothes get dry again."

"That's why Oh always smelled like a dying dog, I guess," says Book.

"She does not!" I put my hands on my hips, and Book laughs.

"Chill out, Little One. I'm just kidding."

I remember that Book was the one who never let me join in her and Oh's games. She said I was too stupid to understand and then when Oh got mad she said, 'only kidding!' So, nothing's changed.

Before she goes, she gives me her jumper and two matches. "Don't freeze to death," she says. "But be careful about that fire. You don't want anyone to see it."

In the end I wait until it's very dark and raining again, and I build the smallest fire in the world under the tarpaulin. When I light it the space fills up with smoke and I can hardly breathe, but I get warm and I decide to go back to Cat World.

**This time something** is different. At first I'm not sure what it is, because everything looks the same, but the feeling is different. So I take a look around and see what I can find. It's just that the back door is open.

The door has never been open before.



The cats can get into the house.  
I can go outside.  
With the cats.

I stand behind the door, ready to slam it shut if a cat tries to get past me. The horses are swaying back and forth. I can feel the sun on my face, and when I close my eyes, bright white blobs fall down the inside of my eyelids.

I can hear voices that sound like they're coming from far away. Laughter, some crazy kids laughing. I smile. It must be Oh. I just know it is.

And I want to get to her, find her, bring her back.

But she's outside.

I could run through the long grass to the tree. I could shout all the way, so the cats can hear me and get out of my way. I'm a brave girl. I'm a big and brave, clever girl.

So I pull the back door open wide, and take a deep breath.

But there is one, right on the doorstep! A black cat, licking its paw. It looks up at me with green eyes and opens its mouth wide like a yawn, and its huge teeth sparkle in the sun.

So instead I go upstairs and I climb into my bed and all my toys are in there. I have a memory of my Mummy sitting on the edge of my bed. I think I can feel the weight of her, near me. She reads me a book, and then she says, time to sleep! And I say, no Mummy, just five more minutes, but she says, come on Little One. She gives me my teddy, the soft black-and-white cow, to squeeze, and I close my eyes and put my head back on the cool white pillow.

**The little fire** has gone out, and everything in the tarpaulin stinks of smoke. Everything is dirty and wet. Everything is cold.

I think if Oh came back now I would punch her in the face. I would claw her eyes out. I would kick her head in. I hate her! She went without me. She is probably on a boat right now, sailing to some other country where she can be safe and live in a house and grow up, and she has already forgotten all about me.

Book comes and brings me half a sandwich and a cup of tea. She is wearing new jeans that are bright blue, and trainers with orange and red flashes all over.

"Mr Cow took me shopping," she says. She does a little twirl under her umbrella. "Not bad, eh?"

I sniff. I pull my knees up to my chest and try to wrap myself around the warm plastic cup of tea.

Book shrugs.

"Hey, Little One," says Book. She takes off her jacket and puts it around my shoulders. "Poor thing. Look at you! You can't carry on like this. You'll freeze to death."

I try to shrug, but all that comes is a shiver.

"Come back with me," says Book. "We'll get you cleaned up. Get you a lovely warm bed."

"Can't," I say. "What if Oh comes back?"

"Silly," says Book, rubbing my arms through the jacket. "She'll find you at Mr Cow's, won't she? It'll be the first place she looks."

That's right, I think. Book is right. So I allow her to pick me up and put me on my feet, and we walk holding hands towards the town.

**Mr Cow looks** inside my mouth and in my ears.

"What are you looking for?" I ask, but Book shushes me.

"She's scrawny," says Mr Cow.

"She's young," says Book. "She's fresh."

They are talking about me like I'm not even there.

**I have a** blanket on the floor. The floor is made of straw, so it's warm at least. There are about ten of us in the tiny, square room, all clutching our blankets. I thought I would have a cubicle, a real bed, like Book does – but she says you have to work really hard to get one of those.

No one in the room says anything to me, and I am too shy to speak to any of the other girls.

I wind myself up in my blanket, and try to make myself small. Sometimes the door opens and Mr Cow or Book comes in and wakes up a couple of girls. They leave the room together. Sometimes the girls cry, and Book puts her arms around them, mothering them. She shushes them and pushes them gently along. If it's Mr Cow, he doesn't say anything. Just grabs their arms and shoves them out of the door.

What happens in the other rooms? I want to ask Book, but she doesn't look my way. Besides,

I'm not sure I really want to know the details. I know the facts – Oh told me all of that ages ago. It's bad, but you can survive it. It's work, that's all. It's the same work Oh did, before she left.

Some of the other girls cry, but I don't feel like crying. There's just this big dry stone inside me now.

Mr Cow says there are rules. He does not let us chew gum. He says it is unladylike, and the customers don't like it. The customers want us to be *there* the whole time. So Book goes around the room and picks up every girl's blanket and shakes it so all their private things fall out: matches and beads and photos, and white pieces of Travel Gum. Book collects all the gum in a plastic bag. When she gets to my blanket, she shakes it out just the same, but I have already hidden my last stick of gum under my foot, and I stand on it the whole time she is looking.

"Good girl," says Book. She hands me the photo of my Mummy. "Don't worry, hon," she says, whispering into my ear. "I'll give you some later, don't tell the others."

When she is gone, I fold my blanket up and put the photo and my last stick of gum at the bottom, careful not to let any of the other girls see me do it. Is this what Oh had to do, I wonder. Did she use up all the flavour and have to go into the room and be *there*, the whole time? I look around at the sea of wide, frightened eyes, and one by one, the girls look away. We are not little girls, I think. We are something much more terrible.

**It's not real**, I think. It can't be real. Somewhere there is another me, a me who is asleep in bed with her mummy sitting next to her, her mummy's weight on the bed next to her. Maybe she is dreaming this. But when I wake up, it's because Book is shaking my shoulder, and her face is close to mine. I can see the make-up smeared over her skin, the little holes where it has sunk down into her pores.

"Little One," she says. "Come on, get up."

She smooths down my dress with her hands and quickly brushes my hair, then runs a smear of lipstick over my mouth. It's greasy and tastes bad.

"Don't be scared, Little One," she says. "There's

nothing to be scared of."

"I've changed my mind," I say. "I want to leave."

"You can't leave now. Mr Cow's looking after you now." Book fiddles with my hair, pushing it behind my ears. "You don't want to be ungrateful."

She presses two pieces of Travel Gum into my hand. "See? I'm helping you."

I throw the Travel Gum away, behind me, hoping it lands on some other girl's blanket.

"Don't help me," I say. "You've helped me too much already."

Book grabs my shoulders and puts her face right up to mine. She whispers, hissing through her teeth. "You want me to call Mr Cow? I'll go and get him, shall I, and tell him what a bad, ungrateful little bitch he's bought?"

I shake my head. I let Book lead me out of the room.

She leads me along a narrow corridor and down two flights of stairs. I notice that the stairs carry on going down, probably going out to the back entrance. Book pushes me along the corridor, and into a room with a bed in it. She gives me a mean look and slams the door shut. I hear the lock being turned.

The room is pink, the colour of bubblegum and dolls' dresses. I climb up on the bed. The bed covers are pink, too, and lacy and frilly. My legs don't touch the floor, they dangle down. I swing them back and forth. I have my last piece of Travel Gum in the pocket of my dress. That, and the five pound note. That's all I've got.

A key turns in the lock.

I jump up from the bed, and run to behind the door.

The man has long hair and a beard, and he is wearing jeans and trainers. He looks kind of nice.

He says, "Where are you, honey?"

Then he unbuckles his belt.

**The black cat** licks its paw and rubs behind its ear. It keeps looking at me with its green eyes.

From far away, I can hear Oh's laughter. Sunlight sparkles over the whole of Cat World.

The black cat stops washing, and pads towards me. It slinks around my legs, around and around, mewing and purring. It's hungry.



**Oh says, you've** got to hit them really hard in the balls, because that's where it hurts the most. You've got to use all your power.

What's power? I want to know.

She taps me in the middle of my forehead, then my chest, then my stomach.

I'm too little, I say.

Oh waggles her eyebrows up and down to make me laugh. Little is good, she says. You've got the element of surprise.

**His face goes** bright red and he doubles over. I might have killed him, but I don't want to stay to find out. I bolt out of the door and race down the corridor. I'm aware of Book somewhere behind me, screeching, but all I can think about is getting down the stairs and out of the hotel. I feel like I could take off at any time, just fly up into the air as I round the corner of the stairs, leap down the next flight, jump into the stairwell and land on my feet.

There's a fire door at the bottom of the stairs, but there's no one there. No guards, just the door. I take it in fast. No guards. No padlock. I hurl myself at the door, and as it swings open, an alarm blares out. It's too late, though. I'm too fast. I am off and running, running on my bare feet on the wet roads, and I don't stop until I get to a long street with houses, and then I duck down an alley and let myself into a back garden, and then out through the thorny bushes into the long grass beyond.

**I follow her** voice, Oh's voice, through the long grass. The cats wind about my legs. The cats follow me and run ahead. Oh is laughing, laughing in that hard, silly, way of hers.

I think she is spinning around and around in the grass. Around and around, with her arms out, spinning until she falls over, and the world keeps spinning her around.

It's all right, Oh, I call out. I'm coming, I'm nearly there.

Through the tall trees I catch a glimpse of her dancing in the meadow. The sunlight bounces off the grass and the flowers. She is laughing.

The cats run towards her, their tails flickering in the long grass, and I run towards her, too, fast as I can. But my foot strikes something, and I

stumble and fall, hurting my hands.

I'm not supposed to see it but I do.

She is lying with her face pressed into the grass. Her hair is all different colours. The men have been here. Her clothes are torn and bloody, her skirt bunched up and twisted round her waist. There are big red gouges down her legs, red and blue inside and squirming with white worms.

And the cats sit a little way away, licking their paws and rubbing them round and round their bloody mouths.

Then we're in the kitchen and the back door is shut.

You're a silly, says Oh. You didn't see anything, really. She picks me up and sits me on her lap. There we go little baby, who is a little diddums, is it you? Is it my little baby? Don't cry, Little One, don't cry, don't cry.

And by the way, she says, don't stop running.

**The sun is** bouncing off the flowers in the meadow. Despite everything, the sun feels good. I hold my arms out and spin around and around, until I'm so dizzy I can't stand up, and I fall into the soft grass and laugh so hard it's like I'm crying.

Maybe she is somewhere in the tall grass, somewhere, hidden away. Like my mummy was hidden, after the men came, and we looked for days and days, but the cats found her first. Wherever she is now, I know Oh is not coming back. And I want to be sad, but I can't, because I haven't got the time. I want to chew Travel Gum and live in Cat World, and lie down here until my body turns into grass. But I can't. I have to get to a place where there is a boat. I have to find the women who help. I have to keep running, because it's what Oh told me to do. Because I'm the only one left in our family, and I have to remember everything.

So I stand up, and brush the grass seeds from my dress, and carry on.

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**Georgina lives in Edinburgh. Her stories have been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Ideomancer* and *Clockwork Phoenix*. Twelve years ago she wrote a competition-winning story called 'The Egg' which was later adapted into a short film you can now find on YouTube. She writes a blog at [www.georginabruce.com](http://www.georginabruce.com).**

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## 2012 James White Award Winner

### You First Meet the Devil at a Church Fete by Shannon Fay

#### **You first meet the devil at a church fete.**

"Hello Stuart," he says. He looks and sounds like a normal Liverpoolian but when you look at him you get that pinched feeling in your chest like when you see a dead animal in the street or the veterans with their missing limbs or your dad fighting with your mum.

"Who are you?" You know but you're not willing to name him.

The man smiles. "Give us a fag, would ya?"

It's weird having an adult ask you for a smoke. You hold your pack out towards him. The devil takes a cigarette with a nod and a smile.

"Atta boy. In return I'll give you a little tip." He takes a drag on the cigarette. You hadn't even seen him light it. When he exhales the smoke claws at the air. "Today is going to be a big day. Today things...change. Things start."

Despite the sick feeling in the pit of your stomach you smile. Your band had performed pretty well today, but that hardly seems like a world-changing event. Not enough for the devil to come all the way to Liverpool.

The devil sighs. "Don't say I didn't warn ya," he says.

"What do you want?" You know it's a bad idea to ask things of the devil but you figure your question's a safe one.

"Oh, I just wanted to say hello, make myself known to ya," the devil says. "We'll talk more later. There are good times ahead, Stuart, but when those good times go bad I'll be there to turn them right round again."

Through the hubbub of the fete you hear someone playing guitar. The devil seems to hear it too. He cocks his head and closes his eyes.

"He's good, isn't he?" the devil says.

You agree but something within you refuses to say it aloud.

The devil shrugs at your silence. "Well, you'll find out soon enough. Run along and join your mates then."

You hate being dismissed like you're some child who dared approach the grown-ups table but at the same time you're glad to be out of this man's presence. You turn and go looking for your friends. You find them outside the back of the church. It's where the music is coming from. Some lad has just finished playing a piece on the guitar. John is watching along with the rest of the band. He looks impressed. That makes you pause. John never looks impressed by *anyone*.

*Things...change. Things start.*

The devil's smoky voice echoes in your head. You look at the guitar player, this baby-faced agent of change, and wonder just what is about to begin.

"Oi, Stu," John says when he sees you. "Did you hear this bloke just now? He's not half bad."

The bloke in question smiles. It's a sheepish, bashful smile and you immediately hate it and all its false modesty. This guy is good and he knows it.

He puts down the guitar and steps forward to shake your hand. "Hi. Name's Paul."

You have to remind yourself to smile.



The James White Award is a short story competition open to nonprofessional writers and is decided by an international panel of judges made up of professional authors and editors. Previous winners have gone on to either win other awards or get published regularly, which is exactly why the award was set up. The winning story receives a cash prize, a handsome trophy and publication in *Interzone*. Entries are received from all over the world, and a shortlist is drawn up for the judges. To learn more about the Award itself visit [jameswhiteaward.com](http://jameswhiteaward.com).

2012 judges Aliette de Bodard and Ian McDonald selected this year's winner. Shannon Fay, from Canada, wins £300. This year the James White Award was also able to offer a prize to the runner-up: Brighton author Philip Suggars receives £100 for his story 'Automatic Diamanté'.

**Paul joins the** band soon after. You start playing in any club that will have you. Your fingers are always bleeding. John tells you that you need to practice more, but the truth is that you already have blisters on your fingers, they're just not from playing guitar. They're from holding a piece of charcoal and drawing for hours, or from painting a picture from start to finish. Each day after school you paint or draw until its dark then you pack up your easel and pick up your bass and meet the boys at whatever club you're playing at that night.

One evening a talent scout approaches the band about playing in Germany. Going overseas is not the glamorous European tour you pictured. Your group is the house band for a seedy club in Hamburg. You're expected to play up to eight hours a night. Like the rest of the band you start popping pills just to keep going.

While your bass playing might have been okay in Liverpool it just doesn't cut mustard in Hamburg. You do get better, playing eight hours a day will do that to anybody, but the other lads get better too and they were already miles above you. You become so embarrassed by your sloppy chords that you play with your back to the audience. Paul is always making jabs at you and your lack of skill. Sometimes he'll unplug your guitar halfway through a song just to prove that it really doesn't matter if you play at all.

There are some nights – the screaming of drunk Germans roaring in your ears the taste of vomit and vodka in your throat the buzz of the

pills in your system the pain in your fingers as you mess up another chord – where you think to yourself *this is what hell feels like*.

And then one night things...change. Things start. She comes into the bar. Her name is Astrid and she is the most stylish girl you've ever seen. She is a photography student at the Hamburg Art College. She barely speaks English, you barely speak German, but that doesn't stop the two of you from seeking each other out. She takes your photograph, you paint her picture. You teach each other your languages. She takes off your sunglasses because she wants to see *deine Augen*. You kiss in a photo booth long after the last photo is taken. She brushes the James Dean out of your hair and turns it into a messy mop top. The other lads like it so much they start wearing their hair the same way.

Astrid begs you to quit the band. It's killing you, she says, and you know she's right but you just can't quit. Just the other day Paul was on your case again about not being up to standard. John put a stop to it by saying "I don't want to be in any band that Stu's not in." How could you walk away after that?

The band goes back to Liverpool for Christmas holidays in December 1960. While in town you play a show. The place is packed, a mix of old fans and curious concert goers who want to see 'this hot new band from Hamburg'. Out of the corner of your eye you watch John and Paul sing at the microphone. Paul plays a complicated chord while holding a high note. You know he's

good, you really do, but when you look at him all you can see is some heavy-lidded bloke trying to steal your best friend away.

After the show you find the car covered in lipstick love notes, most of them made out to John or Paul. You think it's funny. The boyfriends of the girls don't. A crowd forms, half screaming girls, half shouting boys. You get separated from the rest of the band and slammed up against a brick wall. Some local tough punches you in the stomach. The blows keep coming until you're on your back, legs on the pavement, upper body hanging over the curb. A boot comes out of nowhere and connects with your temple. The blow flips you over onto your stomach. Everything comes to you in crackling flashes. You put your hand in a puddle and try to push yourself up. You tilt your head in time to see the boot pulling back for a second kick.

You have just enough time to think that you'd much rather be in Astrid's arms when John is on the guy, pulling him back. John scrapes his way through the crowd and helps you up. Even though you feel like you're going to be sick, you also feel happy. Even if you can't play guitar as good as *some* people, at least you've still got a friend like John.

The rest of your holidays go by quietly. You have an appointment for a head x-ray, but you blow it off. You feel fine.

In the new year you head back to Hamburg with the band. At one point during the boat ride you are lounging on the deck. You don't see him sit down but after a while you become aware that he's there, sitting in the chair next to you. "I was wondering when you'd show up," you say.

The devil smiles. "Been thinking of me, have you?"

"Not thinking, just a feeling. So, what do you want?"

"Oh, it's not about what I want," he says. "It's about what *you* want. I'm here to offer you a place in the most popular and highly regarded band of all time."

"And which band are you talking about then?"

He smiles. "Well, that's the thing. You're already in it."

You laugh. "*John's band*? You must be off your rocker, mate, because we're not the most highly

regarded *anything*."

"Nah, not yet," the devil says. "But you will be. That show in Liverpool? You thought that was big? That was a church fete compared to what's on the horizon. You'll fill stadiums."

"Only sports teams fill stadiums," you say, feeling silly for explaining this to the devil. "And only in America."

"Exactly!" the devil says. He sits up and leans in, eyes catching the light from the setting sun. "I'm telling you, this band is going to be big, bigger than anything that's come before. Hell, you'll be bigger than..." He stops, then smiles. "Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Anyway, I can get you in on the ground floor of this, Stuart. I can make you magic on the bass guitar. John would look at you like an equal. George would go to you first for advice. Paul would never say a word against your playing again. Your name would go down in history."

You lean back and tap your chin. "Would I be able to have any girl I wanted?"

"And then some," the devil says.

"Would I get a street named after me?"

"For sure. Stuart Sutcliffe Way, Liverpool."

"Would I get to drink tea with the Queen?"

"Why, she'll probably knight the lot of—" The devil stops when he notices your grin. He narrows his eyes. "You're taking the piss, aren't you?"

You shrug but can't keep the smile off your face. "Sorry, it was too easy."

"You were never going to say yes, were ya?" the devil says.

You shrug again and look back out at the ocean. "I decided before we left Liverpool that I was going to quit the band," you say. "I doubt they'll cry over it, I *am* a pretty piss poor bass player. I've been thinking I'd like to teach art. I think I might be good at that."

The devil stares at you, like an architect looking over a building for structural flaws. "I wasn't lying about the band," he says. "They *are* going to be big."

"Oh, I believe you." If anyone knows how good the lads are, it's you. "It's just not for me."

The devil shakes his head. You watch as England grows smaller and smaller on the horizon. When you glance over at the chair beside you it's empty.



**The band takes** your departure well. You all go out and get bladdered. John approves of your decision to focus on painting. At one point he raises a glass and extols you as "the most artistic bloke to ever come out of Liverpool". As you start to protest you notice a look of envy pass over Paul's face. The words die on your lips. It never crossed your mind that *he* might be jealous of *you*.

Astrid is happy when you tell her that you quit the band. You move in with her and enrol in the Hamburg Art College. In the mornings you both scramble to get ready, trading clothes and kisses as you get dressed. One day in the spring you ask her to marry you. You have one condition: you want the two of you to wear leather jackets at your wedding. Astrid happily agrees.

You enjoy your classes and quickly become a star pupil. Abstract painting is your thing, even as pop art starts getting bigger. You still see John and the other lads. You actually enjoy the shows now that you're in the audience rather than up on stage. Life is grand.

Except for the headaches. They come fast and bright, like the flash on Astrid's camera. They pierce your skull and blind you. It feels like something is trying to claw its way out. You try to push past it. What else can you do? Astrid worries about you. You can tell from the way she clings to you at night. Your words do nothing to reassure her. All you can do is hold her in turn.

And then one day the second kick comes. It's the fall of 1961 and you are in class. Pain fills your brain and you topple forward, your easel breaking your fall. You wake-up in the hospital. The doctors run tests, lots of tests, but get no answers. They have no idea why your brain is rising up against you. It could be a defect that was always there or maybe the result of previous head trauma. An age old knot: what are we born with and what do we pick up along the way? The doctors cluck and totter around but eventually leave you to rest. Only one man stays behind.

You look at him. "You knew, didn't you?"

He sighs and shrugs in a way that says *give me some credit, I am the devil*.

You close your eyes and press back against the pillow. "This isn't going to get any better, is it?"

"I've never lied to ya, Stuart. Don't make me

start now," the devil says.

You manage a weak smile. "So, are you here with another deal?"

"Oh no," he says. "You've made your bed, my boy." You feel him pat the green cotton blanket. "Now you have to lie in it."

You fix the devil with a glare. "Oh, come off it," you say. "*That's* why you're here? To make me feel guilty about turning you down? If I had said yes, the only difference between then and now is that I would have collapsed on stage somewhere instead of in a classroom. *And* I would have lost Astrid, *and* I would never have time to paint, *and* I would have spent the last year of my life being absolutely miserable. So if you're looking for me to cry and beg, you can just sod off."

The devil shakes his head and pulls up a chair. A second later he offers you a cigarette. After a moment's hesitation you accept. It's already lit as soon as you pull it out of the package. The devil lets out a sigh of smoke and leans back.

"Well Stuart, in your short life you managed to find your love and your purpose. Most people search for decades without finding either. You did pretty well for having only twenty-one years."

Twenty-one years. You're only twenty-one. You realise that you're not going to see twenty-two. You choke back a sob, the pain in your heart for once greater than the pain in your head. The devil clucks sympathetically. When you turn to tell him to get out, his chair is empty. All that's left of him is a drifting wreath of cigarette smoke.

You go home and resume your life. Fall turns to winter which blooms into Christmas. Snowflakes get caught in Astrid's blonde hair and dark lashes. You paint patchy swirls of colour and name them after the city you've come to love.

It's not that you're afraid of dying, you just don't see how heaven can top what you've already got.

You get to see spring. It's April when it comes. You're at home with Astrid when you just drop to the floor. It's kind of nice in a way, actually: if you could pick a way to go it would be something like this, which makes you wonder if there's some divine agency at work. Astrid rides with you in the ambulance, and the wish you made back on the grimy streets of Liverpool comes true: you die in her arms. ■

## BOOK ZONE

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Ian McDonald

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James Smythe

### THE SHINING GIRLS

Lauren Beukes

plus author interview

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Paul Witcover

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Jonathan McCalmont



### PLANESRUNNER

Ian McDonald

Jo Fletcher Books pb, 320pp, £7.99

### Jack Deighton

Tottenham Hotspur supporter, school team goalkeeper and fine Indian cook, Everett Singh witnesses the kidnap of his physicist father, Tejendra, just before they were due to meet on an access visit. He provides the police with mobile phone photos of the kidnap. When his dad's boss, McCabe, turns up asking if Tejendra had left Everett anything, Everett knows something more profound is afoot. Moreover, when his pictures are returned they have been altered. And he is being followed to school and back. As we are immersed in Everett's world his mistrust of the police and the strained relationship with Everett's mother these encounters engender are portrayed well, though like all young protagonists Everett is perhaps just a touch too knowing.

Soon a mysterious folder marked "Infundibulum" and obviously left by his father appears on Dr Quantum, Everett's laptop. Everett knows infundibulum means "bigger inside than out" – references to *Doctor Who* follow – and recognises the contents as a

representation of the multiverse. His father named him after the creator of many worlds theory and he has always been able to think in up to seven dimensions. This facility allows Everett to tie the Infundibulum topologically into a map of the many worlds. Another of his father's colleagues has given him clandestine information about the success of the many worlds project and footage of other universes from beyond the Heisenberg Gates. Ours is E10 in the Plenitude of Worlds but none of the others has a map. This scenario may have been too much for most writers to pull off but McDonald's exposition of the arcane details is lucid and he uses all this only as a jumping-off point. The necessity for plot to rumble on, though – for action – marks this out as a YA novel. Indeed there are echoes of *The Northern Lights* which, given the target audience, is no bad comparison. Echoes of this kind are almost inevitable when the necessity of holding a young audience's attention is taken into account. There is plenty to keep the adult reader going too, though.

Armed with his knowledge Everett contacts McCabe and is transported to where the many worlds project has its base near the Channel Tunnel. Diplomats from the Plenitude are present as Everett demonstrates the ability of his map to target contact with other worlds. One of them threatens him with a strange gun and he jumps through an open gate into E3, a world with no oil-based technology, where rugby is the main spectator sport – and where Everett only has himself to rely on. This is one of the (arguably necessary) perennial features of "children's" fiction: the adventure can only begin if no parents are around to prevent it. The stories are usually the better for it.

Everett finds a library and researches his new environment, quickly working out that the



Plenitude is probably keeping his dad in the Tyrone Tower.

On the underground, Everett meets the wielder of a strange tarot deck, a young girl called Sen Sixsmyth, who tries to filch Dr Quantum, but Everett decides to befriend her. Sen turns out to be an Airish – crew of the airships which ply the skies of E3. Her home is the Everness, whose captain is her adoptive mother and whose crew includes a “Southern” gentleman addicted to quotations and a Scottish-accented guy in charge of the engines. “Captain, I canna get full power when there’s no engine...” Due to his culinary skills Everett is accepted as a crew member and the real fun starts.

To communicate with each other the Airish use a version of Polari, in our world an argot of gay subculture. (This reference would surely go over the heads of most YA readers were an explanation and glossary not supplied at the end.) The Airish have their own customs and loyalties and not a few colourfully named individuals. Any discrimination Everett experiences on E3 is not due to his skin colour but that he is now one of that clan.

The details of this other world feel right even if they are a touch old-fashioned but it is a kind of steampunk scenario after all. Moreover it is one which McDonald clearly has enjoyed creating. Set pieces including Sen penetrating the Tyrone Tower, the inevitable pursuit by Charlotte Villiers and a battle between airships for arcane Airish reasons keep things moving nicely.

Being part one of the Everness series nothing is truly resolved by the end of *Planesrunner* but the denouement and the setting up of the sequel have a logic of their own, consistent with what has led up to them.

*Planesrunner* is bona stuff. One might even say fantabulosa.



### THE EXPLORER

James Smythe

Harper Voyager hb, 400pp, £12.99

Matthew S. Dent

Space is emptiness. Well, sort of. It's certainly a fairly lonely place, vast and silent. It's one of the most captivating features about it, and something which has inspired generations from astrologists to writers to small children looking up at the night's sky – and more than a few of those reading *Interzone*, I'd wager.

It is also, incidentally, the fundamental theme of James Smythe's novel *The Explorer*.

The novel follows Cormac Easton, a journalist who gets the dream opportunity to be part of the crew of astronauts on a boundary-pushing mission to go further into space than any person before. Predictably, it all starts to go wrong from launch onwards.

It's not a particularly original concept, granted, but it wasn't something which particularly bothered me when reading *The Explorer*. It takes the somewhat bold move of practically opening the story with the rest of the crew already having bought the farm – Is that a spoiler? I'm not convinced something can be a

spoiler when it's written on the dust jacket. The immediate effect is that the whole first section is a first-person recount of the events leading up to that point, and Cormac's lonely descent into infuriated madness.

And then it really gets interesting.

Smythe turns an effective and haunting novel about isolation into something altogether stranger and more involved. Whilst reading the first part, I doubted where it would go onwards, thinking perhaps it would be more suited as a short story than a novel. But, without wanting to give any real spoilers, the story only really gets started following that first part.

It is not a novel without flaws. It was confusing – and confused – in places, preferring vague abstraction to giving the reader a little grounding in the actual events taking place. There were also several references to things from mere pages earlier mentioning details that hadn't occurred. The problem is that I was never quite sure if I'd found an error, or if it was a deliberate signifier of Cormac's ragged mental state.

But the biggest problem I had was with the ending. A secondary plot element crops up right in the last chapter, and feels for all the world like an afterthought, an excuse. It would have been better without it sticking out like a sore thumb – but the haunting impact of the conclusion was not ruined by it.

*The Explorer* is an odd little novel. Very thoughtful, and very introspective. There are a lot of ideas buried here within the prose at different depths, hiding amongst compelling characters and the slow reveal of their specific flaws and motivations. I would be lying if I said that I thought I'd understood the entirety. But I did enjoy it, and that has to be a mark in its favour.



### THE SHINING GIRLS

**Lauren Beukes**

HarperCollins hb, 391pp, £12.99

In 1931, a homeless man lets himself into a derelict house in Chicago, using a key he finds in a jacket he's stolen. He finds a room whose walls are covered in artefacts joined together by lines, with names, in the man's own handwriting, yet he has never been here before. One of the names is "Kirby".

In 1974, a man gives a young girl a toy horse for her circus game and promises he'll see her again. Fifteen years later, he attacks her with a knife and leaves her for dead. Her name is Kirby.

Kirby Mazrachi is one of Harper Curtis' "shining girls", young women destined to die because they literally "shine" with potential. Harper's job is to identify each one, then "claim the fire in their eyes and snuff it out". The house sets the agenda; Harper is simply its tool, killing as casually as he might rip the wings off an insect, never questioning the elaborate ritual of taking and leaving objects that the house forces him to carry out. Though he sees extraordinary transformations every time he emerges in a new decade he remains fundamentally untouched

## LAUREN BEUKES: SHINING DARKLY

*review and interview by Maureen Kincaid Speller*

Lauren Beukes is a novelist, short story writer, journalist and TV scriptwriter. Her two earlier novels, both set in an alternative Johannesburg, are *Moxyland* (2008), and *Zoo City* (2010), which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Kitschies Red Tentacle Award. *The Shining Girls*, however, takes us back in time, to Chicago, initially in the 1930s

by them. He learns to navigate the world but makes no contact with it.

While the novel follows Harper's activities during a window of eight months in 1931–32, that window opens out onto a huge vista encompassing almost twenty years of Kirby's life, and beyond that the lives of other victims, from the 1930s to the 1990s. We know their names, what they do, and in some cases, what they would have become. We see how others grieve over their loss and inevitably wonder about the consequences of the deaths that are not fully explored. Indeed, given the occupations of some of the "shining girls", we also think of all the other women put at risk by their murders. The historical sweep of this novel demonstrates over and over the pressures experienced by women who attempt to make a life beyond the home.

Kirby, the survivor, attempts to come to terms with the assault by tracking down her would-be killer, talking her way into an internship on a Chicago newspaper and persuading the man who reported her own attack to help her search the archives for related murders. To the reader, aware of the near impossibility of Kirby's task, her tenacity is impressive. It is not difficult to see why the house might want such potential to be extinguished. Kirby was always going to be sharp, funny, competent; having escaped she is all the more so.

Obviously, this is not a conventional novel about a serial killer, although Kirby's investigation into the circumstances of her assault is a compellingly written murder mystery. Nor is it a conventional supernatural horror novel; though this is another narrative form which relies heavily on the use of threats or violence towards women to drive its plot forward. Another subtext points up the tensions between a deterministic model of the world in which women are expected to fulfil their domestic roles rather than achieve autonomy in choice of career, sexuality or reproductive rights.

*The Shining Girls* is subtle and deceptive. It is possible to read it as a smoothly executed if somewhat odd mystery-thriller, but that would be to miss its multilayered portrait of the precarious situation of women in the twentieth century. Perhaps Beukes on occasion manipulates the plot a little obviously in Kirby's favour, and lays too much stress on the brutality of Harper's killings. Having said that, given how easily we ignore the fact that so many women are killed, in genre and in real life, because they don't conform to a predetermined idea of how they ought to behave, this may be a very small price to pay if it prompts us to think more deeply about what we are reading. And there can be no denying that the most harrowing scenes in this novel involve those left behind to account for a life ended far too soon.



**I'm fascinated by the elaborate structure of this novel. Did that come first, or the subject?**

The subject. It started as a throw-away tweet about a time-travelling serial killer (one of many times messing around on Twitter has paid off for me). I deleted the tweet immediately because I knew it was a great idea for a novel and I could do something interesting with it.

As soon as I hit on the idea, I knew I couldn't set it in South Africa. I was preoccupied with the 20th Century and how much changed so quickly and how that shaped (and reflects) where and who we are now. Set here, it would have automatically become an apartheid novel. I do want to write an apartheid novel (arguably, *Zoo City* and *Moxyland* are both neo-apartheids) but I wanted a broader range to play with.

I've lived in Chicago and it has a lot in common with South Africa. It's a very segregated city with issues around poverty and violence (in one weekend last summer there were forty shootings!) so it didn't feel too different from Joburg. I felt I had enough of a sense of the place to write about it and I went back on a research trip to explore specific history stuff and locations, interviewing historians, police detectives, a zine museum curator, music journalists and sport reporters to fill in the gaps. And then had Chicago friends (and the historian) read and re-read it to pick up any egregious errors.

It's a great setting with a fascinating history that covered all the bases I was interested in, from the birth of the skyscraper to the underground abortion movement, although I specifically avoided reading *The Devil and the White City* until afterwards. I didn't want any overlaps with H.H. Holmes and his murder house thirty years before, although it's acknowledged in Harper visiting the 1933 World



Fair (Holmes allegedly stalked the 1893 World Fair).

And it's absolutely a reflection of all my interests, particularly violence against women and the tradition of the sexy corpse that isn't anything more than that. I wanted my women to live on the page, I wanted them to be real enough that I could have written whole novels about any one of them. I wanted their deaths to knock the breath out of you, so that you felt the horror of it. Forget "mothers, sisters, daughters, wives". They're people. With potential.

That's why it had to be written from different perspectives; Harper's, Kirby's, Dan's, all the *Shining Girls*. It's probably a little confusing in the very beginning, but I think you catch on fairly quickly. I think writers don't trust readers enough.

Of course I had to be very careful with the structure, to ensure everything made sense and that there was a balance of Harper's darkness to Kirby's light, her humour, her relationship with Dan. I mapped it out on a murder wall above my desk; Harper's killing timeline, the actual historical timeline of the murders and the novel timeline which switches between characters and decades. I marked the deaths with red

string and a little skull, tracked the movement of the objects with yellow and black string, kept a close eye on Harper's injuries and how they were healing, had separate cards for each character's life, and colour-coded the chapters so I knew whose voice it was in, so I could tell at a glance if a particular section was too heavy on Dan, say, or Kirby.

And I left room to riff. I know my beginnings and endings, but it's the subconscious play which is the magic of writing, where the research leads you down a whole other rabbit hole or, best of all, where a chapter veers off course as you're writing it and a character does something unexpected but better.

I moved the cards around a lot and clicked and dragged chapters in Scrivener to accommodate that.

**I wonder if Harper isn't so much a time-traveller as a type who exists everywhere and time, so I wonder what the benefit might be of having him moving through time.**

He's absolutely a type; a violent, vile, contemptible man who gets his power trip from hurting women. There are milder manifestations of him in every domestic violence incident, every assault,

every rape, every femicide. Having him travel through time made for a good story and it allowed me to tease out threads of history that I was interested in, particularly how much the world has changed for women (and depressingly how much it's stayed the same, like the fact that our right to control our bodies is still up for debate) and it allowed me to explore violence against women and how that's represented in the media and in crime fiction, where victims become just bodies, a bloody puzzle that has to be solved. I wanted to show their lives, who they were, the tragedy of their lives cut short prematurely. To give them a voice, to make them matter.

His perspective, which is deeply cynical and brutal, let me show how the 20th century changed. He notes the evolution, but doesn't see the wonder. But we can.

**I was reminded of Faulkner's *Light in August*. I felt I saw a similar struggle between free will and determinism: Harper has no room for questioning but no need either, whereas all the women clearly struggle for autonomy in all sorts of ways, only to be overwhelmed by the system.** I haven't read *Light in August*, but I think that's a really good take on it. It is definitely free will vs determinism and Harper is happily complicit until he starts to realise how tight the net is around him, when he starts trying to defy the House, test the boundaries, change the rules, and by the end he's kind of sick of killing, but you get the idea that he'd return to it eventually anyway. It's a compulsion.

And yeah, all the women are in some way defying their circumstances and are overwhelmed by Harper/the system.

I like the twin obsessions that have derailed their lives: Harper's to find and kill the shining girls, Kirby's to find and stop the bas-

tard who did this to her. If she could just let this go, she might be okay, but she carries her scars with her. I think it's interesting that all my novels have had women who are branded in some way by their choices. Kendra in *Moxyland* had the nanotech tattoo, Zinzi had her Sloth, Kirby has her scars. But Kirby's a very different character to Zinzi, who has managed to reconcile herself in some way to what she did, whereas Kirby is not going to let this shit go.

**I am really interested in the way you portray women in this novel and use genre forms which traditionally rely on threats and or violence towards women to move their plots forward, to turn the discussion round and show who those women really are. Would you like to say more about this?**

Well, exactly. It's a response to the way women are typically portrayed in news stories and some crime fiction too. It's just another body, as opposed to somebody. We focus on the details of their death, it's about the autopsy, the bloody puzzle of the wounds. I was more interested in the details of their lives, who they were, what their lives meant and the horror and tragedy of having that cut short.

I specifically write 99% of the murder scenes from the women's perspective and most of them are hung on a few devastating details of the violence. We're not riding along with the killer, complicit in his kill thrill, lovingly, titillatingly described in detail. It's not gore porn, it's about what they're thinking about in their last moments, the fear, the horror, the reality of what this means.

I could have written whole novels about any of them. I wanted them to breathe on the page, to have rich, intriguing lives, to be unusual in their times in a way that also said something about their times.



## THE EMPEROR OF ALL THINGS

**Paul Witcover**

Bantam Press hb, 449pp, £16.99

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**Duncan Lunan**

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In 1758, England is at war with France – the onset of the Seven Years' War, not the Napoleonic one, and so soon after 1745 that many Scots still regard Bonnie Prince Charlie as their rightful king and are backing the French. A Scot who's a French agent features early in the story, reappearing towards the end, and will no doubt be back. A similar American gets short shrift, so the War of Independence may not feature later.

We're promised an adventure in a fantastical alternative London, but we don't see much of it. Most of the action takes place in just two buildings: the headquarters of the Worshipful Company of Clockmasters, built as a giant mechanism including a remarkable internal transport system, and a private house which is basically a smaller copy. This London has limestone caves below it, which must be a long way down if the geology is as we know it. Yet they are inhabited by troglodyte Morecockneyans, "more Cockney than the Cockneys", ruled by a king and

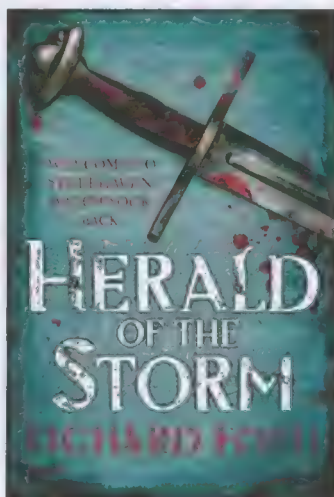


court we've yet to see.

There are many such loose ends. This is Part One of a series, *The Productions of Time* – quoting William Blake and not to be confused with the John Brunner novel – and it does not work as a stand-alone, ending with a conflict which the major characters survive, but we don't know where or even in what universe. Nearly a third of it is flashback to a simulacrum of an Austrian mountain village, in another dimension where Things Are Not What They Seem. The A.A. Merritt-style craziness of it is well done, but it's enough like a typical Hammer movie set to make me wish the peasants with torches would arrive and send us back to London. Over two or more books, perhaps that sequence won't seem so lengthy and so much of a digression.

The Maguffin that everyone is after is a pocket watch which drinks blood, kills people and eats souls – Moorcockian rather than Morecockneyan. Pitt and the French are both after it for the war, but it's more deadly than that, the key to still another dimension where there's a Wagnerian father-daughter conflict between entities who can manifest themselves as humans or as dragons, depending where they are.

One big issue is the parentage of the central character, an illegitimate orphan with a surprisingly good education – though a couple of slips early on suggest it's not *that* good, unless they're the author's. Presumably his father's identity will be crucial in the book or books to come; he gets a Skywalker-style revelation towards the end of this one but doesn't know whether to believe it. And there Witcover leaves us. The narrative style is good, pleasantly dated but not overdone, and despite its bulk the book is a quick read – but it's to be hoped there's a lot more substance to come.



### HERALD OF THE STORM

Richard Ford

Headline hb, 400pp, £19.99

**Peter Loftus**

I should start by pointing out that this Richard Ford is a card-carrying Yorkshireman and not the writer behind *The Sportswriter*. *Herald of the Storm* is his second novel, following up on 2011's well-received steampunk romp *Kultus*.

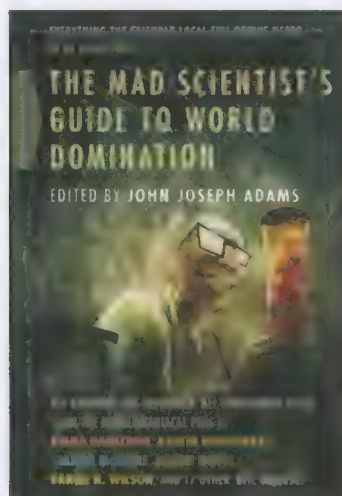
The novel is set in the seething city port of Steelhaven and the action is told from the perspective of multiple characters. We have Massoum Abbasi, herald of the dread warlord Amon Tugha, come to Steelhaven with a final ultimatum; the seemingly stereotypical Princess Janessa, daughter of King Cael caught in a web of suitors, none of whom she wants to marry; Kaira the Shieldmaiden of Vorena, who aches to get out in the world and see some real action; Merrick the fallen noble, reduced to roguish ways and cheap cons in order to earn his next cup of wine; Rag the orphan, cutting purses on the guild-controlled streets; Nobul the smith, a war veteran; Waylian Grimm, a student falling miles behind in his studies at the Tower of Magisters; and finally River, a disillusioned assassin hiding a

secret love.

In fact, the story is told from so many viewpoints that we are over a hundred pages into the novel before any of the characters get a second chapter. Ford's intention with the novel was to create a multi-perspective narrative such as that seen in HBO TV series *The Wire*, exploring traditional fantasy tropes through short episodes filled with character-driven action. A strong feature of this style is the roster of ambiguous protagonists, with Ford admirably elevating his characters' motives and actions beyond simple good and evil. This adds complexity overall and gives a feel of maturity to the writing. Ford flirts with stereotypes but deftly avoids falling in to them.

Another feature is the pared-back prose. Ford takes the time to describe his setting, which almost but not quite gains the status of a character, but beyond that, things move swiftly along. The pacing is excellent and the fact that Ford engages meaningfully with the characters' lives and concerns means people will find this extremely readable, despite any discontinuity caused by the existence of so many different story arcs. Many out there will agree that the last thing the world needed was another overblown epic fantasy and so will join me in applauding Ford's economy and lack of presumption on reader patience.

*Herald of the Storm* is part of the realist fantasy movement of recent years. Yes, there is magic and no shortage of epic events, but you will not encounter any elves or dwarves. Much like Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series, Ford evokes a gritty world of mud, blood and tears where a wrong step can mean death. For the most part, *Herald of the Storm* represents a successful experiment and is a hugely enjoyable read that will have fans scanning the web for news of the next instalment.



**THE MAD SCIENTIST'S GUIDE TO WORLD DOMINATION**  
 edited by John Joseph Adams  
 Tor hb, 368pp, \$25.99

**Barbara Melville**

I like the concept of this anthology more than the anthology itself. Mad science is awesome, and dedicating a book to the subject is, ironically enough, a no-brainer. How could it not work? Indeed the writing is great overall, and every story has something going for it. Each holds interesting ideas and questions, such as what if genius is an illness? What if villains were empathic? What if Frankenstein had a daughter? But I do have a quibble: it doesn't all work together. I question why so many stories made the cut, and I also question their positioning. A few removals and an order change could've elevated this anthology from great to exceptional.

The opening story is notably misplaced. 'Professor Incognito Apologizes: An Itemized List' by Austin Grossman is narrated by a villainous hologram talking to his wife. Now, this is a fun idea – and it has its good points – but openers need to be jaw dropping. This isn't. For starters, Professor Incognito might've been better named

Professor Exposition. There are several references to how his wife found the recording in the first place: "To get this far, you must have found the false wall I put in at the back of the bedroom closet". I wonder if this bombast is deliberate. If so, it's cringe worthy. If not, it's still cringe worthy. His wife *knows* how she got there – there's no need to layer it on with a trowel. These slips into authorial intrusion remind me the pages I hold in my hands aren't portals to magical worlds – instead they are human-created artifice. I hate it when that happens.

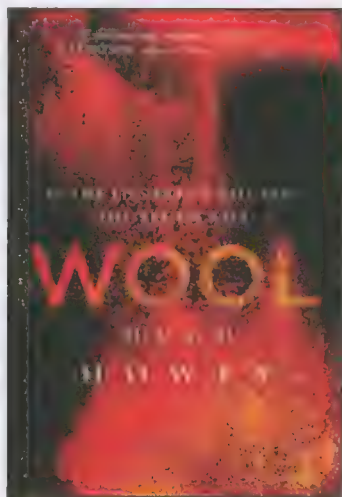
But the world didn't end, so I moved on to other stories. Unfortunately, I couldn't shake the wrath of Professor Incognito. The same bombastic on-the-nose style came up again and again in the book's first half, with several stories opting for similar narration. While they might work well on their own terms – perhaps even shining within different contexts – there's a cocktail effect of combining them: monotony. Hence my struggle to enjoy 'The Angel of Death Has a Business Plan' by Heather Lindsley, a tale of counselling with a twist: "Villainy coaching and superhero surrogacy provide a steady revenue stream, but it's not enough to get out of this tiny basement apartment". I have similar reservations about 'Captain Justice Saves the Day' by Genevieve Valentine: "Brenda had been working for Dr Methuselah Mason for two years the day he mentioned strapping her to the doomsday device". It was like reading the same writers – writing the same sort of stuff – over and over again.

My favourite stories are atypical, messing with my expectations, and standing head and shoulders above the rest. 'Homo Perfectus' by David Farland is one such example; an intoxicating misogynist-eye-view of a disturbing personal mission: "He watched

until her breathing had slowed and deepened, her eyes had closed slits, and her face had become slightly flushed. She was feeling the effects of the pheromones". There's no pointless exposition, no plummeting into clichés, and the plot knows when to twist. Fortunately, there are other strong stories too, including 'The Executor' by Daniel H. Wilson, 'Ancient Equations' by L.A. Banks and 'Blood & Stardust' by Laird Barron, all of which are surprising as well as beautiful. Barron's is a significant favourite of mine, offering a mischievous take on the villain's assistant. This is one many writers could learn from, showing how you can embrace devilry without reaching for off-the-shelf narration. Some of the other authors to found in here include Harry Turtledove, Seanan McGuire, Alan Dean Foster, Theodora Goss, Diana Gabaldon, Carry Vaughn, David D. Levine, Naomi Novik and Jeffrey Ford.

Overall, this anthology is better than most – even the troubling stories are clever. But since there are issues, I'd like to offer my own Mad Reviewer's Guide to Reading It. Tip one – ignore the editor's introductions, or read them last. These little tidbits precede every story, and as cute as they are, they run the risk of a) over-justifying the stories' existence, b) offering hints that border on spoilers and c) telling you what to think. Tip two – unless you want to become a Mad Reader, don't read it all in one go. Tip three – choose your stories at random. Reading them out of order might not work, but then reading them as intended doesn't either. And tip four – embrace your inner evil genius. As the forced but curious foreword by Chris Mantle points out, villains whet our appetites, and I say let them. Armed with these tools, this anthology might just work for you.





## WOOL

Hugh Howey

Arrow pb, 576pp £6.99

Ian Sales

In the world of twenty-first century publishing, the story of the book is often more interesting than the story in the book. And so it is with best-selling science fiction novel *Wool*. Originally self-published as a novelette on Amazon's Kindle, its popularity prompted Howey to write further stories in the same setting. These were then fixed up into a novel. Which promptly sold in huge numbers. Howey earned enough money to quit his job. Publishers came knocking at his door and he sold the film rights to Ridley Scott. Hugh Howey has become the latest poster boy for self-publishing success.

Given all this, it seems churlish to complain that *Wool* doesn't deserve the praise lavished upon it. Its quality is immaterial; it is a success. That is the narrative of *Wool*.

The narrative in the book, however, is not so happy. There is an underground silo of 144 storeys in a world that is toxic. The silo's only contact with outside is via screens, the view on which degrades over

time as dirt gathers on the external lenses. At intervals, people are sent outside as punishment – and the chief crime deserving this sentence appears to be...wanting to go outside. Clad in protective gear which gives these “cleaners” around half an hour of life, they leave the silo and clean the lenses. Then they walk off into the ruined city, but fall and die before leaving sight of the lenses. Why do they always clean the lenses? Why not simply walk off and see how far they get before their suit degrades? It is this first section which formed the original novella, and the puzzle at its heart makes no sense as motivation for cleaning the lenses. It also requires the “cleaners” to be wilfully stupid and ignore what they know...

The remainder of *Wool*'s 576 pages build on this opening section. Since the last “cleaner” was the sheriff, a new one is required. The deputy recommends Juliette, a mechanic from the lowest levels of the silo. The mayor seconds the choice. Bernard, the head of IT, disagrees, and also seems to think he actually runs the silo. Which, it transpires, he does. Nevertheless, Juliette is made sheriff, but her appointment has set the mayor at odds with IT and Bernard soon gets his way. Juliette is arrested on a trumped-up charge and sentenced to “cleaning”. Her friends in Mechanical, however, secretly ensure she is given a suit which will last more than thirty minutes. Juliette has also figured out the suit's secret – this is the premise of the opening novelette – and this allows her to find her way to... another silo.

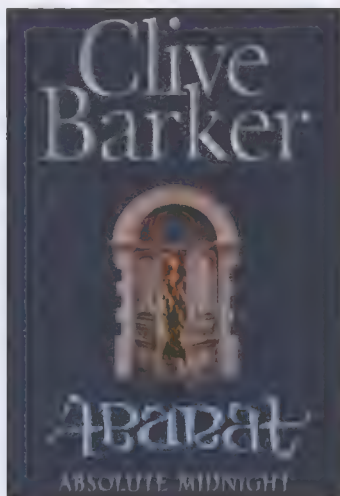
The setting of *Wool* is science-fictional, the opening section is written in a science fiction mode; but once Juliette, who is not only a naturally-gifted mechanic and highly intelligent but also beautiful, is introduced, *Wool* turns into a small town soap opera. Unfor-

tunately, this only emphasises the fact that the novel's setting does not stand up to scrutiny. The silo has a single metal spiral staircase to link its 144 levels, but such a design is impractical. The metal of the staircase would also collapse under its own weight. IT manages a server farm, but the servers do nothing. They don't run the systems of the silo, because there are no such systems. The silos are sealed environments and possess hydroponic gardens, a mine and a well, but they could not be self-sufficient for the many generations the story implies. *Wool* also gives little indication of their size or population. They are deep – 144 levels must make the lowest level 450 to 500 metres below ground – but the area covered by each level is never mentioned.

Howey's prose is readable, if very baggy. His plotting, however, is driven by escalating jeopardy, but it is inconsistently applied, often implausible, and poorly paced. One character discovers something and is killed; another learns something different, and is arrested and sentenced to “cleaning”. Howey keeps his cast under constant pressure, and yet his writing is leisurely paced. His characterisation is typical of commercial fiction: Juliette is super-competent, and Bernard is a pantomime villain. He is, for example, the only fat person in the entire silo.

There's an interesting story somewhere in *Wool* – now the first of a trilogy, to be followed next year by *Shift* – but Howey's writing is neither brisk, economic nor subtle enough to tell it, and his technique of applying constant jeopardy to his central cast annoys more often than it propels the reader forward.

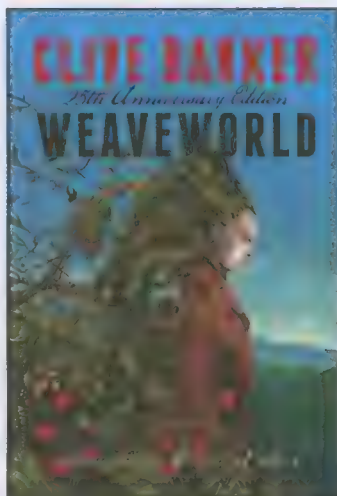
Still, it is useless to complain. *Wool* is a self-publishing success story. The narrative of the book has already been written, and it says that *Wool* is good.



**ABARAT: ABSOLUTE  
MIDNIGHT**

**Clive Barker**

Harper Voyager pb, 609pp, £8.99



**WEAVERWORLD: 25TH  
ANNIVERSARY EDITION**

**Clive Barker**

Earthling Publications hb, 546pp, \$45

**Peter Tennant**

"We who would give you vast and strange domains, where flowering mystery awaits him who would pluck it," wrote the poet Apollinaire. Of the modern day explorers and cartographers of those vast and strange domains, I'd argue that few have an imagination as fecund as that of Clive Barker.

Exhibit #1: **ABARAT: ABSOLUTE MIDNIGHT** is the third volume chronicling the adventures of sixteen-year-old Candy Quackenbush of Chickentown, Minnesota, in "the world of the Abarat, where every hour is an island in one eternal day", to my mind a series with strong echoes of Frank L. Baum's Oz sequence, though Barker's creation is far stranger than anything Dorothy encountered.

As the book opens, our heroine is summoned to face the Abarat's ruling council, where she has as many enemies as friends. There follow further travails, as with the realisation that part of her consciousness is not her own, but that of Princess Boa, requiring the

assistance of the sorceress Laguna Munn. And then there's a return in dreams to Chickentown, where her alcoholic father Bill has found religion and is determined to root out and destroy all things Abaratian, including his own daughter. And dwarfing everything else is the threat of Mater Motley, who launches a three pronged attack on the islands of the Abarat, releasing the sacbrood, who blot out the stars bringing absolute midnight, and then under cover of darkness she unleashes her stitching legions and the vast Stormwalker, a creation of the alien Nephauree, who are using Mater Motley for their own ends.

There's plenty of other stuff too (fecundity, remember), but I think that's enough for you to be going on with.

I've loved this story ever since I read the first volume back in 2002 or thereabouts, and this latest offering easily matches the quality of its predecessors. Candy is the lynchpin that holds it all together and somebody who grows in

stature with each book, a teenager who is wise beyond her years, an innocent who speaks truth while others deal in compromise and politics, somebody who is genuinely free of both guile and bile, and we can only sympathise with the way she is put upon and exploited by others, not least her own father and the parasitic Boa. Candy has many enemies, but her greatest nemesis is the monster that is Mater Motley, under Barker's guiding hand taking on depth and substance, transmogrifying from callous manipulator and destroying avatar into a fully rounded character, her unrelenting hatred given solid grounding in the past, and with scenes that show she is not entirely heartless, rewarding those who serve her well, at times even bordering on the maudlin.

While there appear to be some important gaps in the story, such as what happened between Mater Motley and Boa (but I expect these to be addressed in future volumes), overall the book offers us an epic and largely self-contained design, one of setbacks and steps forward as the opposing forces take to the field, with the shadow of the Nephauree lying over it all, alien creatures whose intentions may be entirely beyond our grasp, though we cannot doubt that they will be inimical to mankind, like the Iad Uroboros from *The Great and Secret Show*. As ever with Barker though, what makes the book special is the wealth of invention, the sheer variety of wonders that he brings to the page and uses to add complexity to his plot, something of which this review can only give the merest hint. Simply put, this is a book of vast imaginative scope, one in which there are innumerable moments of jaw dropping splendour, with the audacious creation of the Abarat itself but the most magical gesture in a whole



miscellany of wonders.

Exhibit #2: **WEAVEWORLD: 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION** celebrates the quarter century of the book regarded by many as Barker's best, and is a sumptuous production with a reflective introduction by the author and a wealth of striking black and white illustrations by artist Richard Kirk. *Weaveworld* marked a step away from the work with which Barker made his name, volumes like *The Books of Blood* and *The Damnation Game*, and into some other terra incognita where horror was but one of many aspects of the fantastic at the writer's disposal.

To crack open its covers is to step into a reality where our world is known as the Kingdom and human beings are referred to as Cuckoos by Seerkind, a race of magic makers who move between our reality and that of the Fugue. And yet, for all that, the Seerkind face extinction, first at the hands of the unbelieving Cuckoos and then from the Scourge. To survive they are forced to go into hiding, incorporating their reality into a magical carpet, one where the Fugue is hidden in the very warp and weft. But the guardian of the carpet is close to death, and hostile elements seek the Fugue for their own ends, the three-in-one that is Immacolata and her cohort, the Salesman Shadwell. It's up to two Cuckoos, Cal Mooney and Suzanna Parrish, a descendant of the guardian with access to the power of the menstruum, to save the Fugue and preserve the future of Seerkind.

At the risk of repeating myself, fecundity of imagination is the thing with Clive Barker, I think. Yes, there is a marvellous story here, one that can be approached as pure adventure, but what makes it so much more than that is the sheer variety of invention Barker brings to the table, his imagina-

tion soaring effortlessly to give us a world in which Seerkind and their raptures co-exist with mankind and fallen angels. Then there is the beauty of the Fugue itself, a magical land in which wonders can be found, and yet at the same time with its being securely rooted in reality, so that it never seems totally incredible, but feels like home, a place where Seerkind argue and shout at each other, just as we Cuckoos do, where they get drunk and flirt and sing off key, a place where the magic is grounded in a concrete understanding of how it all fits together.

While Cal and Suzanna have a heroic dimension to their characters, the most memorable creations are the villains of the piece – the self-obsessed Shadwell, who sees everything in terms of the price that will be extracted for it, with his jacket that gives the viewer the thing they most want; the policeman Hobart, who has allowed his devotion to duty to turn him into an unthinking and unquestioning monster; the alien creature that is the Scourge, with vast power to offset the delusions he has about his own nature. And then, most significantly, there is Immacolata with her two sisters and their army of by-blows, who seems like a cross between the Holy Trinity and Kali. What

appears to be central with each of these villains is egotism: while the good characters wish to preserve the magic of the Fugue for the benefit of all, the bad wish to force their own version of reality on everyone else, and are prepared to destroy the things they cannot possess.

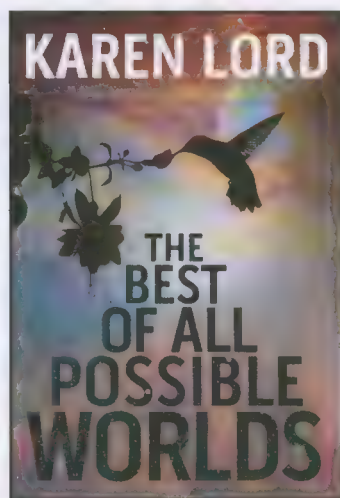
As Barker states in his introduction, memory is at the heart of this story, with so many of the characters acting as they do solely because they have forgotten their own natures, as with the Scourge that takes on the mantle of avenging angel simply because its true identity has been lost and this self-deception empowers it to make sense of and acquire a purpose to its existence. In one sense, the Fugue itself is a Palace of Memory, preserving all that is best in Seerkind and Cuckoos alike, a template for how the world should be. And yes, there are memories too for the reader, of what we felt on first reading this book and comparisons to how we feel now, and perhaps also memories of the other adventures shared with Clive Barker over the years, the sights he has shown us, this in turn leading us to speculate as to what wonders he may yet have to share.

Flowering mystery: I want to pluck it. I want more vast and strange domains.



Peter Tennant writes the Case Notes feature in our sister magazine *Black Static*. Every issue contains in-depth reviews of novels, novellas, collections and anthologies, as well as an interview with a featured author – in issue #34, out now, the featured author is Mark Morris.

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### THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

**Karen Lord**

Jo Fletcher Books hb, 325pp, £20

**Jonathan McCalmont**

If there is one thing that we should all take away from the human experience thus far it is that humans are astonishingly bad at living with each other. We tend to be okay as long as everyone looks and acts exactly the same but the second we're confronted by any variation in race, culture, creed or sexuality you can be certain that there will be tears, pogroms and angry letters to *The Telegraph* before bedtime. Clearly mindful of humanity's abysmal track record in this area, Karen Lord's follow-up to *Redemption in Indigo* explores not only the nature of multicultural identity but also how this multicultural ideal might be reconciled with the all-too-human urge to surround oneself with people who are exactly like us.

The book opens with a genocidal assault on the Sidari home planet that forces the surviving (and overwhelmingly male) Sidari population to seek shelter on Cygnus Beta. The only problem is that, while Cygnus Beta is renowned for its effervescent multiculturalism,

the Sidari are a race of emotionally repressed pseudo-Vulcans whose primary interest lies in reconstituting their race and culture by breeding solely with women of Sidari descent. Nowhere is the ensuing clash of cultures more evident than in the book's central relationship between two junior civil servants: the impossibly broody Dllenahkh and the impossibly giggly Grace Delarua, who also serves as the book's narrator. The opening chapters are full of promise as Lord does a pretty decent job of introducing us not only to her world but also to her characters and the fact that the obvious romantic tension between Dllenahkh and Delarua symbolises the relationship between the Sidari and the ideal of multiculturalism. However, Lord somehow then lets the book get away from her.

The title alludes to Voltaire's *Candide*, a philosophical satire in which all manner of calamities and injustices are met with the naïvely optimistic dictum that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds". Much like *Candide*, *Best of All Possible Worlds* is built around a series of episodic encounters between the cast of the novel and a social vignette embodying some sort of philosophical or cultural problem. For example, in one encounter, Delarua is forced to come to terms with the fact that a sociopathic psychic has been manipulating both her and her entire family for years. In other encounters, Delarua and Dllenahkh encounter elves, flying monks and murderous opera singers. The problem is that while Voltaire made it absolutely clear that all of his vignettes were intended to show the foolishness of religious optimism, it is not at all clear what (if anything) Lord is trying to communicate through this series of encounters.

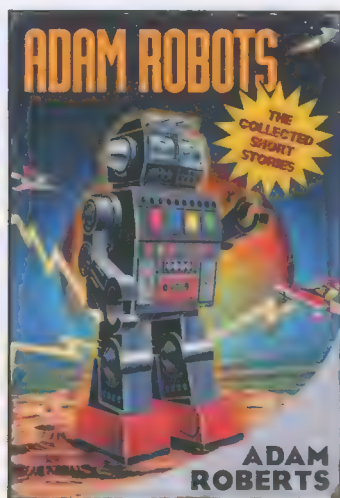
Every time Dllenahkh and Delarua encounter a problem,

they deal with it by calmly applying one of the many bureaucratic protocols designed to deal with conflict and disagreement. In fact, the inhabitants of Cygnus Beta are so intensely bureaucratic that they even use government bodies to select their spouses. Even more troubling is the fact that all of the characters talk of their racial heritage in language unheard since the days of colonialism and eugenics. While the characters' access to DNA scanners mean that they stop short of discussing skull sizes, everything from intelligence to individual personality traits are accounted for purely in terms of which race a person's ancestors happened to belong to. In short, Cygnus Beta is a multicultural society but it is one that has more in common with the governments of Stalin and Hitler than it does with contemporary liberal democracy.

Given the links with *Candide*, one might expect all of these encounters to be leading up to some grand revelation in which the characters learn to look past racial classification systems and begin to trust their own choice in partners. Unfortunately for any LGBT people living on Cygnus Beta, Lord never quite gets around either to interrogating the principles of the society that she has created or suggesting a viable alternative. Even Delarua and Dllenahkh are unable to recognise their true feelings until the state has officially decreed that they are in fact compatible.

Aside from being either insufficiently satirical or alarmingly regressive in its attitudes to race, this is a dull and monotonous piece of writing that is sorely lacking in both tension and drama. Prominent discussions of telepathy and similarities to the sociological SF of LeGuin may provide a nostalgic thrill but the book feels under-written and under-developed given the potential displayed by *Redemption in Indigo*.





## ADAM ROBOTS

Adam Roberts

Gollancz pb, 400pp, £12.99

Paul Graham Raven

One of the time-honoured methods for reviewing a short story collection is to tease out the commonalities between the pieces, seek out the underlying theme, that sort of thing. Adam Roberts deftly stymies that approach right from the get-go; at first glance, the tales in *Adam Robots* represent a checklist of classic skiffy riffs and power chords, all the established sub-subgenres of the genre present and correct: the robot story, the time-travel story, so on and so forth. This is a familiar issue for readers of Edam Rarebits, in that one can never be certain what he's going to write next. For the reviewer, the challenge is to get inside the stories and work out what makes them – and, by extension, Rarebits-the-writer – tick.

Easier said than done! These stories are slippery, changing their faces while you read, subverting your expectations, détourning time-worn tropes, leading you down the garden path in order to tip you into the pond, then hook you out dripping with an apology so sincere you can't be quite sure

it wasn't all your own fault in the first place. And so the titular robot story turns out to be a disquieting look at the question of free will, while the time-travel story turns out to be...well, I wouldn't want to spoil them for you, would I?

But there's more afoot than the mere subversion of subgenre. Deception abounds, from the surface on inwards – and it is the surface layer that is, perhaps, the greatest deceit of all. We have come to expect serious science fiction to wear its seriousness like a cloak; non-trivial matters must be described directly in straight-faced prose, lest someone mistake the work for the naïve SF of earlier eras, or – heaven forbid! – suspect it of harbouring pretensions to literariness. As a result, seemingly serious science fiction has lost its ability to say much worth saying, the brow-furrowed grimdarkness of its surface a disguise for its conservatism and lack of substance, for its weak engagement with its own themes.

Had'em Rabbits, however, can't keep a straight face for more than a few lines. He takes a modernist's delight in natural narration and dialogue, in the awkward fumbles and misdirections of real speech and thought, in word-play and – of course – in puns. Such frivolity is surely unsuited to the serious matters of science fiction!

But this is to judge the book by its cover – quite literally so in this case, given Gollancz's bold choice of jacket art. The tacky tin-toy robot, the bright primary colours and jaggedly infeasible laser blasts... What could be more childish, more at odds with the philosophical profundities of the genre at its hardest, eh?

The jacket art is a deliberately ironic, of course, as is Badham Rowboats's approach to science fiction – which, ironically enough, is a genre whose core readership doesn't really get irony. Delighted

and frustrated at once, Rowboats rags on sf – on its clichés, on its neurotic self-regard, and on the latent sociopathy of its *Weltanschauung* – like the exasperated spouse of a feckless genius, landing low blows and lofty critiques alike with an accuracy acquired over a lifetime of cohabitation. This is tough love, as Jerry Springer might say.

The end result, I'd argue, is a return to the values of "hard" science fiction, rather than a lessening of them. While the short stories published in the soi-disant "Big Three" magazines still reliably mash the sublimity buttons to crank up the ol' senswunda, it's rare that they make me ponder humankind's relationship to its universe in such subtle ways. And therein lies the secret, perhaps – absurdity and irony as the only viable aesthetic with which to capture an absurd and ironic existence? It works for me, at any rate.

Which isn't to say it's all plain sailing, of course. Rawbitz stories make you work to get the best out of them, which makes them much less light a read than their playful prose might suggest, and if you're looking for happily-ever-afters about the intrinsic virtue of *homo sapiens*, you're looking in the wrong place. Sometimes the word-play overpowers an idea which would have worked better played straighter ('The Man of the Strong Arm', for example, which ends with a groan-inducing pun), and other times a neat little notion will rattle around in an over-large tale like a ball bearing in a washing machine (eg. 'Anticopernicus', a story as frustrating in execution as it is brilliant in conception).

But as a whole, *Adam Robots* showcases not only the subversive style and attitude of this most idiosyncratic of authors, but also the enduring life of science fiction as brain-bending *gedankenexperiment*; once you see past the surface, the depth of the pool is revealed.



### DANGEROUS GIFTS

Gaie Sebold

Solaris pb, 381pp, £7.99

Lawrence Osborn

*Dangerous Gifts* is the sequel to Gaie Sebold's first novel *Babylon Steel* and continues more or less where that leaves off. Babylon was once the avatar of Babaska, a goddess of war and lust. Now she is the madam of the best brothel in the city of Scalentine having previously spent some years working as a mercenary. In the first novel, due to financial embarrassments, she allowed herself to be hired by Scalentine's shadowy Diplomatic Section to find and protect Enthemerlee, a young visitor from the world of Incandress.

Incandress is inhabited by two apparently distinct races: the dominant, humanoid Gudain and their servants, the reptilian Ikinchli. However, Enthemerlee is proof that the two races are in fact one. For some generations the Gudain have been declining in numbers while the Ikinchli have been increasing. Enthemerlee's return to Incandress promises the emancipation of the Ikinchli and a possible answer to the barrenness of the Gudain. Inevitably, vested interests wish to assassinate her.

Babylon is persuaded to act as her bodyguard at least until she has undergone the rites that will set in motion the changes so desperately needed by her people.

Babylon's task is complicated by the intervention of a group of xenophobes from Scalentine who are conspiring with conservatives among the Gudain. To make matters worse, the conspiracy is being manipulated by a very nasty capitalist who wants to use Enthemerlee's assassination as part of a plan to make a financial killing. On top of all this, Babylon is distracted by the knowledge that most of her brothel's money is tied up in a silk shipment currently on its way to Scalentine via Incandress.

It has to be said that *Dangerous Gifts* is very much a sequel. Much of the character development was done in the first novel, so while this novel could certainly be read on its own, the reader would get a fuller idea of the main characters and their relationships by reading *Babylon Steel* first. Having said that, Sebold has not allowed her story to suffer the fate of many mid-series novels. There is a satisfying resolution of the storylines that were posited at the beginning of the novel.

At the same time, there is promise of more to come. It clearly seems unlikely that Scalentine's Diplomatic Section will leave Babylon alone. In both novels, Sebold has teased us with intriguing hints about the abilities of Darask Fain, the Section's representative. Babaska clearly believes she has unfinished business with Babylon. And Babylon's friend, the mad magician Mokraine, is giving her cryptic warnings of dangers ahead.

Gaie Sebold continues to offer us well-paced action and vivid descriptions. And *Babylon Steel* is a very engaging narrator who lightens the story with amusing one-liners. In summary, a satisfying read.



### JUDGE DREDD: DAY OF CHAOS: THE FOURTH FACTION

John Wagner, Ben Willsher, Staz Johnson, Colin MacNeil and Henry Flint

Rebellion Books pb, 160pp, £17.99

Ian Hunter

Somewhere in the labyrinthine loft of Hunter Towers are boxes filled with really old copies of *2000AD*, so old that they are square-shaped and made from paper that has browned with age. I used to read *2000AD* back in the day when Dredd had a cleaning lady called Maria, and he was sometimes assisted by Walter, his faithful manservant Wobot.

The days of all-out comic relief are gone, although there is a rich seam of black humour (as dark as pitch) and satire running through the pages of *Days of Chaos: The Fourth Faction* starting with the first offering 'The Skinning Room' right through to the final story 'Elusive', especially those stories which involve the dastardly deeds of PJ Maybe, your friendly neighbourhood psychopath who used to be the Mayor of Mega-City One under the guise of the popular (and, actually, not a bad politician) Byron Ambrose. Maybe is a



genius who comes over as a cross between Hannibal Lecter and the Joker. He certainly shares Lecter's prowess at escaping and remaining undetected while a whole city of Judges is after him, yet he manages to find the time to deal with those who have the audacity to think they can step into his very large Mayoral shoes, particularly one Tony Blore, the front-runner in the campaign to replace him.

That's one story arc. The other thread running through these stories is one of revenge, and for the survivors of the Sov Block city, East Meg One, it has been a long-time coming. Cue their greatest agent, Nadia, who has managed to sneak into Mega-City One to activate the sleeper cell within and set the wheels of revenge in motion. But will her overwhelming hatred of Dredd get in her way? And, when the Sov plan is revealed, the Judges take the easy option of blasting the enemy compound from high in Earth orbit. This is despite Dredd's opposition to the plan and his suggestion that the only way to be certain is to send in ground troops and make sure that those who need to be killed don't get away. You don't ignore the opinions of the meanest Judge of all, and no doubt it will be revealed in a future volume that the other Judges have made a big mistake in ignoring Old Stoney Face.

Stripping aside the story arcs and the black humour, the satire and all the science-fiction paraphernalia, what actually makes these stories work is that they are old-fashioned police procedurals where the detective work and the hunches and the gut instincts matter more than the uniforms and big guns. These are great, entertaining little stories with sublime artwork for the likes of Willsher, Johnson et al. Sign me up for next instalment where Dredd growls "I told you so". I say "You tell them, Joe."



## OSIRIS

**E.J. Swift**

Del Rey tpb, 425pp, £12.99

**Simon Marshall-Jones**

In this debut novel, the opening salvo in *The Osiris Project*, E.J. Swift presents a scenario that's all too possible, a future which isn't all that hard to divine given the economic malaise currently assailing the West.

The *Osiris* of the title is a city, a grand dream made real. It's built on the ever-shifting oceanic tides of a world forever gone, a fitting metaphor for the uncertain foundations, both physically and socially. *Osiris* has been perpetrated by the intransigence of political structures unwilling to let go of privilege. Similarly, the ruling elite have deliberately inoculated themselves against the reality festering in their midst. It's a divided city; wealth lives in the city proper, whilst abject poverty and unrest have been quarantined to the Western Quarter. The twain will never meet either philosophically or ideologically, both are mistrustful of the other, and both are unwilling to bridge the gap. An incendiary recipe. Change is the only way to defuse this bomb.

The principal lightning conduc-

tors are an unlikely pair: Adelaide Mystik, a wealthy socialite wrapped in superficial luxury and frivolous emptiness, estranged from her family; and Vikram, a poor resident of the Western Quarter. They have something in common, however, because despite the social chasm they are both haunted by ghosts; Adelaide by her missing twin brother Axel (around whom ultimately everything pivots and who can also be seen as a cypher for mankind's unerring capacity for hope), and Vikram by the death of Mikkeli, a fellow refugee fighting to improve the lot of the underclass. It is perhaps inevitable that these polar opposites will collide. The question then becomes will that collision bring opportunity or catastrophe?

Swift employs lean, spare precision in the telling, with beauty and lyricism held in the spaces between the words. *Osiris* is a democracy of privilege and its inhabitants are fully realised; a highly detailed picture of a rigidly hierarchical society in a city on the verge of upheaval. The tectonic friction between the two social bodies, those of the city dwellers and those outside its bounds, sharply expressed, is the engine which drives the narrative. Whether intentional or otherwise, the work is a parable for our own times, uncomfortably prescient in its implications.

Here is an assured and accomplished debut novel from a writer we're sure to hear more from in the future. Swift's intensely observed interplay between the two principals mirrors in microcosm the obstacles to easing tensions between the factions. This is the beauty of the picture – the brushstrokes are broad but look closer and you will discern incredible detail.

An absolute gem – there are many who would do well to take note of what this book says.

## FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

### 1.

**Surveying the landscape of popular culture, it is hard not to feel that science fiction is going through something of a troubled time.**

While the world of literary horror positively bristles with newfound creative energy and the grandees of epic fantasy are canonised by American cable TV, science fiction drifts aimlessly between nostalgia and self-immolation as awards and critical plaudits are split between the people who produce old-fashioned science fiction stories and the people who produce stories that could just as easily have been written under the auspices of an entirely different genre. As Paul Kincaid put it in a review of several Year's Best Science Fiction anthologies: science fiction is in a state of exhaustion. Its core ideas and values have now played themselves out to the point where they not only lack social relevance but also fail to resonate with contemporary audiences.

One of the best accounts of what can happen when a popular idiom ceases to resonate with wider cultural values is found in the 2010 Dutch horror movie *Sint*. *Sint* is set in contemporary Amsterdam where frisky students use the feast of Saint Nicholas (or "Sinterklaas") as an opportunity to get drunk, get high and get laid. However, while this vision of a North European Santa Claus reinvented as the liberal patron saint of roach clips and threesomes may resonate with 20-something

students, it shares very little with the myth's original foundations. According to the film, the real Saint Nicholas of Myrna was a murderous bishop who rode around the countryside with a gang of North African cutthroats kidnapping children and selling them into slavery. When the film has the real Saint Nicholas turn up and resume his rampage, the gap between the Sinterklaas who murders students and the Sinterklaas celebrated by students beautifully illustrates the process of what some sociologists refer to as cultural drift.

While both the liberal and the regressive visions of Sinterklaas contained within the film are clearly exaggerated for comic effect, they are undoubtedly based upon a real and growing distance between the values of Dutch society and the values embodied by the original myth of Saint Nicholas. Faced with a choice between retaining the values that accompany their cultural icons and getting new myths to fit with contemporary values, generations of Dutch people have chosen to carefully re-interpret and remake the myth of Sinterklaas in such a way as to ensure that he remains more-or-less relevant to most contemporary Dutch people. Aside from explaining how a 4th



Century Greek Bishop wound up serving as both a Coca-Cola mascot and the Senior Elf of Christmas consumer debt, cultural drift has also been central to the history of science fiction.

One of the topics I would like to explore in future columns is the idea that, far from being fixed in stone, the history of science fiction is something that can (and must) be remade by each new generation of readers. However, the history that has been left to us by our forefathers (and it's always fathers) is one of imperial expansion and contraction in which figures like Wells, Verne and Gernsback sense the raw potential of their civilisations and capture it in tales of even more powerful civilisations peopled by square-jawed men who marvel at their own moral grace whilst crushing the Universal Other under the heels of their immaculately-fitted space boots.

Memorably described by Charles Stross as the "fictional agitprop arm of the Technocratic movement", science fiction has tended to do incredibly well in periods of hubristic cultural expansion when the boundaries of possibility somehow appear both endless and within easy reach. Despite this proven track record when it comes to frontier spirit and two-fisted optimism,



science fiction has also displayed a remarkable capacity for re-invention that has seen it resonate in periods of intense cultural retrenchment when all thoughts naturally turn to the moral difficulties of empire and what it means to live in a culture that has definitely passed its prime. In the case of the British Empire, H.G. Wells' socialist futurism found its natural opposite in the terrified conservatism of John Wyndham, whose characters reacted to alien plants and eerie children alike with the same weary yearning for cups of tea and comfy arm-chairs. Similarly, in the case of the American global hegemony, the confused but emphatic utopianism of Robert A. Heinlein was gradually transformed into the tortured liberalism of Joe Haldeman, proving that bad wars tend to produce much better literature than good ones.

Given that the literary science fiction scene has long been dominated by straight, white, middle-class, Anglo-American men, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of us have grown accustomed to a literature that is bound up with white, middle-class Anglo-American concerns. Indeed, the decline of the British and American Empires matter enormously to the people of Britain and North America and so it makes perfect sense that writers would inject those concerns into their writing and that critics would, in turn, extract them from their own readings. However, while the grand sweep of geopolitical history may provide a convenient way of tying together thousands of books published over a period of decades, science fiction can also react to much subtler shifts in the skein of human history. In fact, many of science fiction's most fruitful creative eddies have had absolutely nothing to do with the rise and fall of white-bread empires.

The world changes every day and each new morning heralds the rise and fall of countless tiny empires. In some cases, the empires are so small that they are only ever mourned by individual authors who take their failed marriages, their unhappy childhoods and their uncertain sexualities and turn them into stories that will only ever make perfect sense to the people who wrote them. Other times, the empires are big enough and important enough that literary movements arise to chronicle their rise and fall. Like a simple organism clinging to the side of some deep-sea thermal vent, science fiction fed on the energy of second-wave feminism and western de-industrialisation and turned them into the feminist SF of Joanna Russ and the cyberpunk of William Gibson.

One explanation for the genre's current state of exhaustion is that SF has struggled to find an empire big enough to lend it that sense of wider cultural resonance. However, far from being a failing of science fiction, this apparent lack of broad cultural narratives can be seen as symptomatic of a much wider problem with Western civilisation. In his book *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher argues that Western civilisation has now so completely internalised the logic of capitalism that it effectively finds it easier to imagine the end of the world than it does to imagine a time in which society might be radically different to the way it is now. This sense of the future's intellectual unattainability also accounts for why one of the few growth areas in contemporary SF has been books in which the world comes to an end in a whimsical and unlikely fashion such as a blurring of the line between the actual and the possible in Nick Harkaway's *The Gone-Away World* or the evaporation of sleep in *NOD* by Adrian Barnes.

A different account of how science fiction lost touch with the future can be found in Daniel T. Rodgers' magnificent *Age of Fracture*. Rodgers argues that the last forty years have seen Western culture growing increasingly hostile to the sort of broad and inclusive cultural narratives that once provided science fiction's thematic bread and butter. Instead of placing themselves in the heart of great narrative empires, people today build little narrative platoons that resonate only with themselves and the people closest to them. The ever-shortening horizons of our cultural perspectives explain why the Hugo Awards seem to ignore the books most celebrated in Britain and no publisher thinks that books by non-English writers will ever make enough money to make them worth translating. As a culture, we have retreated in on ourselves and pulled our literature up after us.

This sense of blockage is everywhere...it's in the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, the films we watch and the books we read. Terrified of change, we cycle faster and faster through the last five decades, desperately trying to convince ourselves that everything is 'retro' and 'vintage' rather than merely comforting and familiar. Though interrupted, a future is out there waiting to be written amidst the drone strikes, the cloud storage and the teenagers born into the twisted prisms of social media. Like Christmas celebrants tired of a blood-drenched Dutch Santa Claus, it is time to allow science fiction be remade anew. It is time to take a literary idiom designed to celebrate the dreams of Victoria and Roosevelt and use it to unpick the nightmare that the 21st Century seems poised to become. Enough with the deconstruction and the nostalgia, the future is out there and we can rebuild it...we have the mythology.

# LASER FODDER TONY LEE

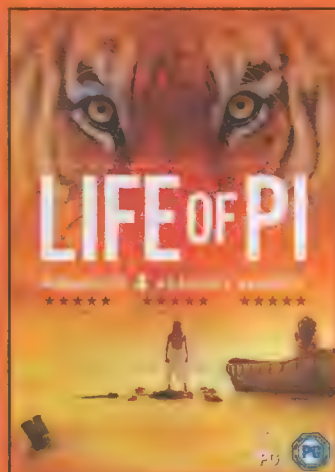
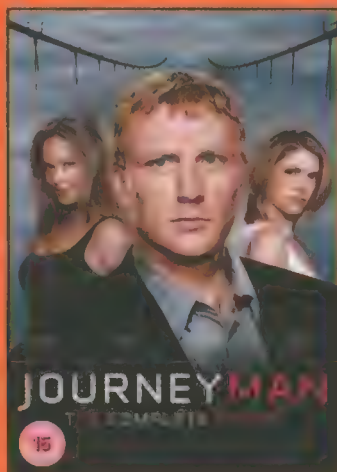
JOURNEYMAN

LIFE OF PI

FRINGE

DR WHO AND THE DALEKS

DALEKS' INVASION EARTH:  
2150 AD

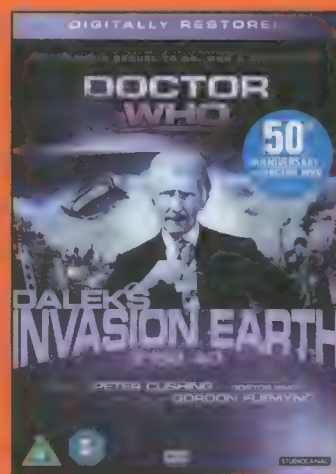
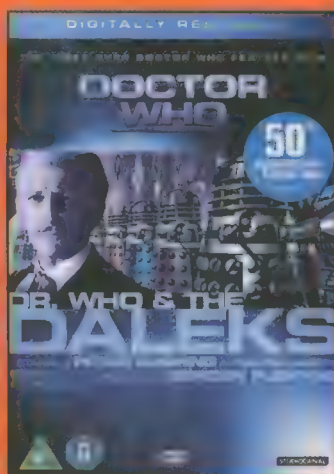


"Don't be afraid of the future." Made in 2007, **JOURNEYMAN** (The Complete Series, DVD, 29 April) is a romantic mystery drama about time travel. Created by Kevin Falls, it stars Kevin McKidd ('Poseidon' in *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*) as Dan, a newspaper journalist in San Francisco, who jumps backwards in time, usually at inopportune moments. Dan's editor doesn't care much about tachyons, and so any serious investigation of SF is relegated to the proverbial back-burner, until Dan risks his life while attempting to preserve, or change, his personal history. His inexplicable disappearing acts cause endless problems for his long-suffering wife Katie (Gretchen Egolf), not to mention his young son, and Dan is torn between two women when he's

reunited with his 'dead' ex-fiancée Olivia (Moon Bloodgood), actually another time-traveller who becomes his guide on 'missions'.

There are lapses into soap opera as Dan's brother/cop Jack (Reed Diamond, the best actor on this show) grows suspicious about Dan's seemingly self-destructive unreliability as husband/father. Yet, basically, it's another plain-clothes superhero/standard TV-action time slot filler, completely lacking fresh ideas. The most science fictional episode is penultimate timeline paradox *The Hanged Man*, which sees Dan lose his new digital camera while performing a rescue in the past and (while cribbing from *A Sound of Thunder*, *The Terminator* and *The Butterfly Effect*), this radically alters the state of computech progress, and spawns an alternative family situ-





ation in the present. Sadly, Dan manages to fix all the problems, despite the parallel universe being a more intriguing world. There's none of the boldness or genre-literate humour of early *Fringe* to be found here.

A Fox/NBC product, from a variant recipe, this is high in incredulous belief and low in logical persuasiveness. *Journeyman* rolls off the back of familiar TV favourites, as *Quantum Leap* meets *Early Edition*, while it lacks the appealing weirdness of *Life on Mars* (UK or US version).

The show is quite well produced and often competently directed, with good period details, but it has mediocre characters and formulaic save-the-day plots about second (and third and fourth) chances, and karma/fate stories of an 'if only' rather than 'what if' type that usually disappear into wormholes of happy ending predictability. Although one story has a baby born on a plane, the programme makers are practicing certified safe sci-fi.

Disc extras: a 75-minute making-of featurette, and a 20-minute video by Falls and other writers on what might have been if this show had not been cancelled after thirteen episodes.



Sometimes, no matter how vague or bewildering, disjointed or simplistic its plot is, a movie comes along boasting astoundingly dynamic imagery that is more than enough to entertain us or, at least, make watching it certainly worthwhile if not essential. Just imagine such a movie – like Terrence Malick's briefly glorious *The Tree of Life* (Black Static #25) stripped of its tiresome soap opera yet showcasing extraordinary visuals that are better integrated, although imperfectly, into the storyline, instead of seeming like inserts from elsewhere. Ang Lee's **LIFE OF PI** (Blu-ray/DVD, 29 April) proves the accomplished director of *Hulk* is now reaching

for even higher peaks of artistic vision and technical prowess, but only managing to bundle assorted metaphors or allegories at bargain prices, offering little value beyond overwhelming surprise or bemusement.

It's an absurdist tale of an Indian boy who survives a cargo shipwreck but finds he is lost in the Pacific, and must share his lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. For roughly an hour of screen time, we are at sea with young 'Pi' Patel, battling storms and boredom, flying fish and starvation, while he struggles to co-exist with the wild beast. The most hallucinogenic sequences are of underwater swarms, but, later on, there is a fantastic, carnivorous

island, populated by meerkats, before this miraculous journey of teenage self-discovery peters out into a naive closure that's rather infantile considering all the pseudo-epic drama we have seen. *The Life of Pi* is not a masterpiece of cinema except as superbly realised CGI: the tiger becomes a character, almost as strong a persona as Caesar in *Rise of The Planet of the Apes*. Understanding this movie – especially as it has been touted as a story about religious faith – should not get in the way of enjoying it as a wondrous spectacle of danger and enchantment. Its philosophical content is no more profound than that which we have already seen in other big movies about lonely castaways, or man-versus-nature stories. It functions best as a two-hander of fantasy theatre, with a pair of character studies of natural enemies/opposites locked together in a crucible of interdependency with the narrative commandment: co-operate or die.

If it reminds you of John Boorman's classic antiwar drama *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), or, indeed, genre-specific variant *Enemy Mine* (1985), that is to this movie's credit. The conflict here is not political of course. It is of an even more primal nature, centred on basic limits of a food chain. Teen survivor Pi actually learns far more than his zookeeper father taught him. The tiger is, decidedly, not his friend; but the animal does not have to be his foe either. Compassion and tolerance are not life lessons that Pi acquired from his tourism of religions. He found his answers to spiritual questions in taking responsibility for something other than himself. *Life of Pi* is not a story that will 'make you believe in god'. It's a bit more than just *Waterworld* meets *The Jungle Book*, it is a wonderful movie that refreshes your confidence in humanity, and artistic expression in today's cinema.



The year is 2036, and emotionless 'alien' overlords – bald Observers in MIB suits and hats – have bought dystopia to Earth so that humans live as refugees, slaves, or worse. "You are here," and there is no chance of escape. **FRINGE** (Season Five Blu-ray/DVD, 13 May) has a new title sequence, where such mainstays of modern civilisation as joy, individuality, education and freedom are now listed as 'fringe' mentality/conceptual stuff. It's a world of egg-sticks and amber gypsies, a grim future where frozen heroine Olivia (Anna Torv) is freed, like sleeping beauty, from suspended animation. Reunited with Peter, they put the questing team back together, to search for all the scattered pieces of amnesiac Walter's plan to defeat the invaders. Beta-max videos are used as found-footage clues to the once mad scientist's lost memories, recovery of which drives the main plot. As in Kenneth Johnson's popular genre TV show *V* (1983–4, remade 2009–11), thematic reference to the resistance movement in Nazi-occupied Europe sets the tone, but several genre influences include *The Matrix*, *Inception* and *The Adjustment Bureau*, which furnish various sci-fi elements, cleverly incorporated into an admittedly fuzzy narrative. Action centres on using antimatter for sabotage of cargo deliveries – arriving via wormhole from a distant future

– and cybernetic Peter's dehumanising vengeance that results from loss and grief.

There's a pocket universe as the ultimate hidden vault, and a genetic anomaly in the form of a mute boy, Michael, who never ages but forms an integral part of the fugitive heroes' plan. The Pythonesque/Gilliam-style cartoon sequence is a delightful diversion fulfilling a role as comic relief. Overall, the five seasons of *Fringe* have been fascinating, as escalating explorations of how an evolutionary singularity is mistaken for a new enlightenment, but the show's sketchy slate of sci-fi possibilities all collapse into a parade of overly sentimental closure scenes that are almost grossly maudlin. If this was a British production, a *Quatermass* prof would die at the very end, tragically, as just another unknown hero of science, and horrifically, but without any fuss.

Long before the 1960s 'new wave' SF integrated modern philosophy with genre concerns, early sci-fi cinema like *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* suggested that any striving for our utopian dreams meant finding a balance between the heart and mind, something questioned poetically and most coherently in music by Rush's 1978 album *Hemispheres*. How can we divert the self-destructive power of aggression away from the dead-end of greed and channel it towards far grander ambitions



of discovery and creativity for genuine social progress? Obviously, education is part of the answer, and while that does seem effective on an individual level, how can it work for a patchwork society? How do we teach those contrary/other people who refuse to learn from all of humanity's past mistakes?

Final episode, *An Enemy of Fate*, is the 100th of this series and a neat farewell story, and it wrestles with the big problems of our future, but it proves to be a cop-out ending. It shirks responsibility for suggesting any answers, and so it concludes with a simplistic wallow in a present moment of fleeting happiness. Elsewhere on the TV sci-fi playground, Spielbergian family adventure *Terra Nova* only escapes from the great 21st century crisis of apparently too-daunting problems for a time-travel pilgrimage back into the Cretaceous. It is an exodus that runs away from impending extinction to colonise another timeline, but still takes all of mankind's stupidly regressive attitudes with them. There's some fun with dinosaurs, but woefully Disneyesque family values, and conflict as libertarian ideology crashes headlong into rampant vicious capitalism. But, like the conclusion of *Fringe*, *Terra Nova* fails to empty the proverbial Pandora's Box and so attempt to solve the terminal confrontation with our twin failings of greed and paranoia. Hope for the future means a lot more than a pastoral idyll, or escapism. Never mind the love, where has all the optimism gone? If even the most thoughtful of genre television dramas cannot imagine anything very much better and inspirational than placid novelties such as this, and that, then what chance is there of any practical innovations and radical change in the real world? Honestly, man... "Can't we find the minds to lead us closer to the heart?"



Helping to celebrate the 50th anniversary of a certain Time Lord, and the centenary of Hammer icon Peter Cushing's birth, we have a pair of retro sci-fi adventure features, **DR WHO AND THE DALEKS** (1965), and sequel **DALEKS' INVASION EARTH: 2150 AD** (1966), both released on Blu-ray, 29 May. Adapted from Terry Nation's seminal work for the TV series, there is no mention of the show's Gallifreyan mythology, of course; that particular demystifying element wasn't properly introduced until the 1970s. The first movie switches between knockabout comedy-adventure, for which clowning Roy Castle is the fall-guy, and cut-price alien menace, for which a mutant creature, inside the armoured shell, is revealed to have a webbed three-clawed 'hand', like a variation of the defeated Martian's limb in *War of the Worlds* (1953). Cushing's version of the Doctor is an apparently scatterbrained grandfather boffin, claiming to have invented the TARDIS, so he's like the nameless hero from *The Time Machine*, and George Pal's 1960 movie of Wells' novel was an obvious source of inspiration for *Doctor Who*. But Cushing's elderly hero is also something of a provocateur for Skaro's gullible pacifists the Thals – who are reminiscent of the enthralled blond Eloi from *The Time Machine*. Acting the crackpot eccentric, but with hidden levels of devious intelligence, Cushing more of less repeated this performance a decade later for Burroughsian movie *At the Earth's*



*Core*, adding a further genre reference to his quirky characterisation of what would eventually become a British institution. Disc extras include the documentary *Dalekmania*; a restoration featurette; and an interview with Gareth Owen, author of *The Shepperton Story*, the studio where these *Doctor Who* pictures were filmed.

A resistance fighter's line – "You can't fight metal with flesh and blood" – eagerly anticipates *The Terminator*, and *Daleks' Invasion Earth: 2150 AD* is much better fun as a spectacular action-packed adventure, despite a few obviously painted backdrops, than its modest predecessor, boasting a scale that the original BBC productions could not match. In a ruined city under alien occupation, streets are patrolled by robotised slaves, like previews of Borg assimilation but with cheesy topping. When a submarine Dalek emerges from the river, it's clear the squawking dustbins are no longer dependent on metal floors and static electricity. Sadly, although this 80-minute thriller is hectic with incidents, the Daleks' final countdown to neutron bombing the planet's core has all the dramatic tension of waiting for a kettle to boil. Extras include a restoration featurette (the widescreen Technicolour looks fabulous) and an interview with Bernard Cribbins who plays a hapless policeman. Any similarities between this inhumanly ruthless Dalek dictatorship and the mercilessly destructive forces of Britain's present 21st century Tories is purely coincidental.

# MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

UPSTREAM COLOR

THE HOST

OBLIVION

ROBOT &amp; FRANK

IRON MAN 3

GI JOE: RETALIATION

JACK THE GIANT SLAYER

HANSEL AND GRETEL:  
WITCH HUNTERSOZ THE GREAT AND  
POWERFULTHE ODD LIFE OF  
TIMOTHY GREEN

DARK SKIES

THE BAY



A famous man once said: “We create our own demons ... We start with something pure, something exciting; then come the mistakes, the compromises.” We’ll get to Tony Stark’s guide to Hollywood in due course, but it would be a mistake not to open the show with a tickertape welcome back for the insanely uncompromising Shane Carruth, who made *Primer* for \$7000 to test Robert Rodriguez’ PR about the budget for *El Mariachi* (which expert eyes have estimated at around \$200,000), before trying and failing to make just one pure, exciting sf film in Hollywood in the time it’s taken Marvel to create four Iron Man films and three further *Avengers* feeders, and who has now given up and unbottled his demons in **UPSTREAM COLOR** instead. There are two competing narratives about Carruth based on these events. According to one, he’s a self-effacing indie-sf visionary who needs Hollywood like Gwynnie needs horseburgers and Kiarostami needs Jonah Hill; in the other, he’s a control-obsessed crazy who in the wake of *Primer* had the studios lining up to give him nibble pedicures and Soderbergh and Fincher on board as producers, but whose belligerent refusal to engage with others’ creative input made him impossible to work with and his darkly Spielbergian IMAX epic *A Topiary* impossible to fund. Whichever story is true – and Soderbergh,

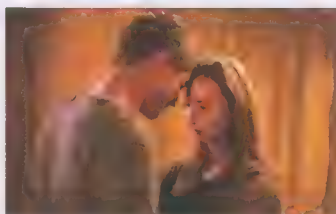
for one, remains one of Carruth’s biggest cheerleaders – one or more of these figures has now quietly made a small, mad, beautiful film that confirms him as something like sf’s Malick (a comparison he would doubtless detest).

Like *A Topiary*, *Upstream Color* is a film about blindly fondling a cosmic elephant, as different groups of characters try to deal with an imperfectly understood science-fictional system that adsorbs their lives as they become part of its reproductive cycle, the full workings of which are revealed only to the audience. In *A Topiary*, it was a viral alien technology; here it’s an enigmatic biological agent affecting memory, volition, and individuality, whose four-stage cycle through nature is intercepted at different points by disconnected specialists including a thief who uses worms in party pills to infect marks, empty their accounts, and leave them with no memory of the events, and a composer who lures the infected (here it gets quite rapturously weird) to a farm where he transfers their parasites to a herd of pigs through which he can remotely monitor their experience for ambient CDs with titles like *Repetico* and *Extractions*. But the story is actually told through Amy Seimetz’s concept artist (you see some test footage from *A Topiary* on her laptop) whose life goes belly-up when she tastes of the worm, and who slowly pieces the missing



part of her life back together with the help of Carruth (as the fellow victim she marries) and the text of *Walden*.

As this fruitless attempt at a synopsis makes clear, Carruth is engaged in a quietly furious war with Hollywood narrative, writing score and script in symbiosis and grumbling about the inadequacies of traditional screenplay format for his kind of radically non-local storytelling, where a "scene" can take place in multiple locations. (The extraordinary final scene of *A Topiary* runs to a page and a half of script, but spans six worlds, a montage of untold others in four-second shots, and a pulsar of matching period.) It's only after the lights come up that you realise that *Upstream Colour*'s final twenty minutes had quietly and fusslessly dispensed with dialogue entirely, and those who've watched *Primer* a lot (and anyone with the DVD has to watch at least three times to get all the fantastically unrevealing commentaries) will immediately recognise what are now revealed as Carruthian trademarks: the combination of Tarkovskian language of image and feeling with crazily fast, short, elliptical scenes to which you have to attend with merciless closeness. (The whole first third of *A Topiary* was to be mounted in what Carruth glossed as "previously" time.) The one disappointment is that, obviously, it isn't actually *A Topiary*, of which Carruth has ominously started to speak in past tenses; he now has two cheap and makeable films lined up instead, at least one of which is not even obviously sf, and it's not clear he will ever want to reactivate the project even if the opportunity improbably comes. But then Carruth's contribution to *Looper* was an absence of an absence, a memory-erasing visual effect which was never used. Perhaps the downstream traces are all we'll ever see.



For those who've been waiting years for a romantic drama about parasitic worms, this is the moment all our buses come at once. One of my daughter's schoolfriends was in a psychiatric unit during the holidays, where their Easter treat was a cinema outing to **THE HOST**: Andrew Niccol's film of Stephenie Meyer's bizarre love quadrangle of a myriapodic alien symbiote, the human host she inhabits, and their rival boyfriends in the literal human underground on an occupied Earth. As a hormonal mood-lifter for a minibus of self-harming teens, it must have sounded like a good idea at the time; but it would have been smart to have checked out the novel beforehand, dealing as it does with a girl trapped silent and powerless in her own body for 600 pages of schizophrenic italicised inner dialogue while her controller argues nobly for her own death. Understandably the film was not a hit with the patients, two of whom promptly attempted suicide; and while the wider critical response hasn't been quite as vivid, the Meyer magic hasn't managed to migrate the *Twilight* fanbase to a second franchise host, despite strong sales for the book. It's a shame, because Niccol has actually done a fine job with the material, wielding the scalpel with skill, fixing much that's wrong with the not terribly good novel, and turning what seemed an intrinsically unfilmable narrative (since the central conflict is between two characters mutely sharing the same head) into a beguiling symbiosis of Heinlein's *Puppet Masters* and *I Will Fear No*

*Evil* in a single young-adult vessel. It initially seems as if even the mighty Saoirse Ronan isn't going to be able to pull this one off, as she engages in conversation with her own voiceover by simply turning her head and muttering into the camera; but the film is so sincerely in love with its own unembarrassable silliness that the viewer has no choice but to fall in. "If I can't kiss her, I can kiss you!" (Snog, whack.) "I knew it! You're still in there! You hit me for kissing you!" Or: "It's not really me you like; it's this body. You wouldn't care for me if you could hold *me*, my body in your hand. This is so wrong; you're not even from the same planet..." (That was the best *Futurama* ever.) Niccol was a far from obvious choice to adapt, and indeed at one stage dropped mysteriously out of directing his script in favour of Susanna White. It's not clear what happened to bring him back – perhaps nothing more sinister than White's commitment to *Parade's End* – but Niccol's trademark shiny futurism and a relaxation of the novel's no-hanky-panky rule haven't diluted the things that the novel does most effectively. If you read enough Meyer, her inner voice and her Mormonised fanfic view of the world worm their way in like a shiny millipede in your spine, and it comes to seem not only normal but right that novels should linger for hundreds of pages on small interactions between characters too loved to come to harm. Like some other girls' storytellers with whom Meyer isn't often compared – Miyazaki, for one – she doesn't flinch from the unfashionable celebration of original virtue and a sly subversion of lazy fictions that draw propulsion from wilful denial of our nature's essential goodness. To his enormous credit, Niccol respects that, even if audiences seemingly don't.



The lost memory of another life and an Earth before the invasion is the titular object of Joseph Kosinski's **OBLIVION**, based on an ashcan comic by the director of which only nine pages seem ever to have been mocked up. Tom Cruise and Andrea Riseborough serve as a cleanup squad on a devastated Earth nearing the end of their tour, their memories wiped "for security reasons" (hmm indeed), and looking forward to rejoining the rest of the human race on Titan, humanity's new home following an apocalyptic war with a mysteriously underspecified alien foe. But it's clear from the outset that something is quite badly wrong with this picture, even before Tom discovers from his own secret *Walden* man-cave that terrestrial humanity isn't as obliterated as supposed; and the film spaces its largely unsurprising revelations along a narrative path that is essentially the adhesive

backing for a portfolio of deeply resonant science-fictional images of cloud-level isolation on an emptied Earth. Exquisitely shot (by Claudio Miranda, the *Life of Pi* Oscaree), it's a scenario a lot of sf's children will recognise from their dreams, and Kosinski has referenced *Silent Running* and *Solaris* as models alongside the inevitable *2001*. Inevitably to get it made he's had to play the Tom Cruise game, and like all of Tom's filmic vessels it becomes a film about being Tom Cruise, since the biological organism of that name is essentially a jaeger, the pilot of a gigantic vestigially-humanoid machine. So the plot shares some bandwidth with Scientological myth, and the love triangle between Tom, Andrea, and Olga Kurylenko becomes an eerie mirror of the Church's quest to find Tom a wife. But even as we watch we remember other, deeper stories that even this one hasn't completely managed to forget.



Oblivion has a more natural but still more ludicrous part to play in **ROBOT & FRANK**, where retired cat-burglar Frank Langella is assigned a mechanical nursemaid to help him shepherd his fugitive marbles, only for Frank to leverage the Three Laws to enlist it to help with his heists. Luckily Frank is the ethical kind of criminal ("I always went high-end; that way nobody gets hurt except those insurance company crooks"), and all he wants to lift is a collectible volume from a closing library and some vulgar bling from annoying yuppies in black designerwear and terrible hair and glasses. At first all goes well, with the mechanical accomplice outperforming Frank's natural family in duty of care, until he has to dump the evidence by erasing Robot's memory – whereupon it turns out that Frank's dementia has wiped his own memory of a monstrous twist whose vibrations would bring down Jericho. A nevertheless interesting pitch at a science-fictional engagement with the senior experience of future shock, technophobia, and the displacement of family by dehumanising systems, it suffers from some very old-school effects and what seems deliberately terrible production design. The bittersweet payoff is that Frank gets away with it, but ends up banged up in a different kind of institution, with the cheerless apparent moral that cognitive decline can be indulged in its hobbies but never really be arrested.





Tony Stark is struggling to manage his own memories in **IRON MAN 3**, a mighty Marvel megamashup of toothgrating thespian business (Tony's post-wormhole combat stress, the dysfunctional ersatz dadding of the demographic juvenile geek) with insistently zippy dialogue and a storyline noisily assembled from fragments of plot that zoom around banging into things as they try to fit together. The *Iron Man* films have always been about the relationship between the man and the suit, the performer within and the cgi shell that wraps itself around him and turns him into a hero; and the Marvel Phase 2 version ramps up its metaphor by allowing the suits to multiply crazily, whip on and off in mid-air, and wind themselves around different bodies or around none, allowing the star to deliver remote drone performances in multiple locations at once. As a film for fans, it does some startling things with deep-canon elements, with the Iron Patriot turned 180° around, and a revisionist twist on the Mandarin that works brilliantly within the walls of the film thanks

to Sir Ben's mealmaking of his post-bombshell scenes, but which goes several giant steps beyond all that has been considered sacred in previous Marvel movies. But as the brief flareup over the Chinese footage in the international version reminded, Marvel are hard at work on the Chinese market, and the deconstruction of the Mandarin's ethnicity is part of a wider strategy of Sinophilia as he villainises his army of Extremis-weaponised vets to enact China's revenge on inauthenticity, denouncing Graumann's ("another bad American knockoff") and fortune cookies ("hollow, full of lies, and leave a bad taste in the mouth") before being revealed as, in a different way, just another performer in a fortune-cookie suit.

Some fan appeasement, at least, is offered by the climactic geek gallery of checklist highlights from Tony's historic wardrobe, though much of the associated value is left uncashed. An early sequence where Pepper suits up seems obvious preparation for a last-act appearance as Rescue at minimum (and my money had been on putting her in the

Hulkbuster, which explains why I have no money). One can see why those cooler options were rejected for cinema-grammar reasons, and for the most part everyone delivers as contracted; but the activation of the Clean Slate Protocol was probably a smart move, now that a lot of the time it feels like Iron Man is simply playing Robert Downey Jr. Some of the homages are a bit too loving – the Dr Manhattan-riffing scene where the suit romances Pepper while Tony carries on in his lab; the recycling of a famous Eric Idle joke with a less funny punchword – and as the Phase 1 contracts begin to run out, the whole film is framed as a shaggy-dog narratological joke whose payoff is revealed only in the weak post-credits scene featuring the Avenger with the most films left on his sentence. As for Tony's demon management, he's good at giving out stark advice, but in a film which manages to put the Hulk to sleep and the previous director in a coma it's a bit rich that the hero's biggest demon is insomnia. Just wear a Zeo and watch the caffeine; no need to be a pussy about it.



**GI JOE: RETALIATION** throws new bodies liberally into old suits for a second shot at Hasbro's live-action franchise, catching us up on the 2009 film's villainous plot to put Arnold Vosloo in Jonathan Pryce's body as a Cobra stooge in the White House, but with the hero line refreshed to rotate the old Joes off the shelves aside from Ray Park's Snake-Eyes (who spends both films in a mask anyway). So Channing Tatum's Duke is unceremoniously bodybagged as motivation for new lead Dwayne Johnson, Bruce Willis drops in for a couple of afternoons' shooting as the Platonic Ur-Joe of which the rest of the team are mere cis-lunar shadows, and a new team of under-Joes retires Marlon Wayans and Rachel Nichols in favour of foxy briefings on computational linguistics from Adrienne Palicki's Lady Jaye, while head villain Destro spends the entire film literally on ice, presumably because Joseph Gordon-Levitt has priced himself out of the casting since the first film. London replaces Paris as this instalment's digitally trashed capital, raising the curtain on what promises to be a bumper season for wiping the Thames off the face of the planet, as Pryce's evil PotUS plays hijinks with the nuclear football; but *Retaliation's* secret weapon, one that even Tony Stark can only gawp at in viridian envy, is 3D IMAX bungeeing ninjas. Admittedly they don't have much to do with the rest of the film, but frankly that's a problem for the rest of the film. Once you've seen the bungee-ninjas sequence, all other cinema falls away into an abyss of oblivion, including everything that follows in this specimen.



3D vertigo is a big component of Bryan Singer's medieval kaiju spectacle **JACK THE GIANT SLAYER**, which pits acrophobic commoner Nicholas Hoult against a Skull Island in the sky populated by surprisingly dodgy cg Ulstermen of titanic stature, as he seeks to rescue abducted princess Eleanor Tomlinson with the aid of knightly buddy Sir Ewan McGregor (actual dialogue: "I've got a rather bad feeling about this"), and in doing so to climb the barricades of class between earth and sky and win his bride in her suit of skinny gold armour which serves no function at all beyond making her look hot. By turns a fairytale version of an alien-invasion picture, an allegory of the British in Ireland, and an American take on aristocracy set in the land of bring out your dead, it has a wonderful animated prologue with wooden monks climbing a beanstalk in search of God, a fantasy worthy of vintage Vincent Ward; but when the giants finally get recursively around to planting magic beans at the top of their own beanstalk, the result grows disappointingly downwards, and the film's imaginative ambitions take an earthward downturn with it.



Tommy Wirkola's **HANSEL AND GRETEL: WITCH HUNTERS** offers more of the same but darker, cheaper, and surprisingly often wittier, in a quirky Norwegian steampunk take on the action fairytale that sees Jeremy Renner and Gemma Arterton as grown-up slayers seeking to take down witch queen Famke Janssen in revenge for their own orphaning. Among the busy anachronism gags, the obligatory magazine-loading crossbows are supplemented with folk-art graphic novels, hand-cranked battery tasers that double as defibrillators, woodcuts of missing children tied to milk bottles, and even an inexplicable stash of early-modern insulin for Hansel, diabetic from being force-fed witch candy as a child. With no interest in the family market, it features the largest number of heads blown away yet seen in a fairytale film; but it's hard not to feel some respect for a film that thinks there's the core of a good film in Terry Gilliam's *The Brothers Grimm*, to the point of recycling Peter Stormare in a strange accent. It's all a bit of a bodge, but nobody in Hollywood would dream of making an action film about an adult brother and sister, and at the very least it blows the head off *Snow White and the Huntsman* for a fraction of the budget, which is doubtless why a sequel has already been promised.





Leathered-up witches of dark and light return to much more questionable effect in Disney's **OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL**: a preemptive spoiler strike on Warners' attempt to reboot the MGM Oz franchise with a film version of *Wicked*, here proposing a rival secret history of the Witches of Oz in the years before Dorothy's descent, in contradiction to the Gregory Maguire novel series and musical. Sam Raimi has ended up in the dock for this one after Tim Burton, whose execution of Linda Woolverton's *Alice in Wonderland* established the template, wisely wanted nothing to do with this misbegotten, misogynistic mess, which sees James Franco's womanising showman Oscar Diggs seduce Mila Kunis' ingenue witch and then dump her for Michelle Williams' blonder Glinda, thereby driving Kunis to the dark side while somehow allowing the deplorable Diggs to reinvent himself as one of those smoke-and-mirrors heroes that Hollywood finds so affirming. As with the shockingly ill-written Maya Hansen in *Iron Man 3*, a one-night stand with a lying, philandering sac of pus is the trigger that activates the vacillant dark side beneath the skin of every woman, needing only the wrong

sort of nudge to turn her wicked and ugly and her dress sense the opposite of her white-wardrobed blonde-bland rival. "One bite and you'll change forever," coos bad sis Rachel Weisz, offering the apple of wickedness: "Your heart will become impenetrable"; and an extraordinarily disturbing scene follows where Kunis realises too late that she's been tricked into choosing damnation ("It's just your heart withering away", as she goes into agonisingly vivid arrest), though a black bustier beneath confirms, like those tight leather trousers Diggs smooth-talked his way into, that her soul was always ready for the dark. The nearest thing to pure evil that Disney has yet concocted, it teaches us that the kind of genocidal wickedness that leaves broken porcelain Helmand orphans can be combated merely by faith and the magic of early cinema, and that all powerful women need is a weak man to stand behind. "The witch is gone! The witch is gone!" cry the Munchkins after their new wizard's victory; but for more than intellectual-property reasons they can't pronounce her dead, and more chart-topping ding-dong is promised "when those witches come back, and you can be sure they will." Pay no attention.

Another car crash from Marvel's studio symbiote comes with **THE ODD LIFE OF TIMOTHY GREEN**, whose only possible explanation is that Ahmet Zappa got director/co-writer Peter Hedges stoned and they gigglingly decided to pitch Disney a hoax project that nobody in possession of their senses would knowingly green-light. Then when the studio fell for it they scraped some mind-altering blue dust off an orchid, stuck an infected worm in a capsule and fed it to Jennifer Garner and Diane Wiest, and in the stars' resulting suggestible state persuaded them to sign on to a film about an infertile couple (Garner and Joel Edgerton) whose designer kid emerges from their vegetable plot as a full-grown ten-year-old after they've accidentally planted magic beans in the form of pencilled sheets of character specs for their inconceivable child. Most of the rest can be inferred from prominently placed signs under the credits: STANLEYVILLE, POP. 5213. THE PENCIL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD. STANLEYVILLE PENCIL FACTORY. ESTABLISHED 1876. CRUDSTAFF HOUSE AND PENCIL MUSEUM. SAVE THE FACTORY: MEETING TODAY. All this may have one kind of resonance for a nation itself raised on *Walden* (whose making was substantially underwritten by income from the Thoreau family's own pencil factory), but fans of Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers* will find it difficult to regard the pencil-museum sequences with the requisite solemnity; and the framing of the whole film as a pitch meeting to an incredulous adoption agency betrays the film's acute consciousness of its own difficulties in being taken seriously. "We make mistakes trying to fix our mistakes," admits Joel, and when asked "What would you do differently?" he shrugs and responds, "We'd make better mistakes." In this case, it wouldn't be difficult.





Scott Stewart's **DARK SKIES** is an unassumingly run-of-the-mill horror version of the alien-abduction narrative drawn heavily on, sans aliens, by *Upstream Color*, and validates its own authentically science-fictional mandate to frighten by opening

with Clarke's famous 1997 *mot* "Two possibilities exist: Either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying." Essentially a loose necklace of haunted-house set pieces drawing to various degrees on ufological canon lore, it's at

its most effective when it most directly taps the situational repertoire of abduction scenarios: the night-terror alien discovered looming over the bed (a moment also used to great effect in *Iron Man 3*), the nasty rashes nobody will believe are alien implants, and above all the Lovecraftian revelation from J.K. Simmons' clipping-happy ufologist that the invasion has *already happened* and the Grays are routinely performing unimaginable horrors on us for reasons we don't stand a chance of comprehending. As in close genre relatives *Signs* and *The Fourth Kind*, the grammar of horror proves a rather effective set of cinematic tools to trigger the Clarkean frisson, though the ending is blunted by the laborious flashbacks for inattentive viewers who have actually managed to be surprised by the weak final twist.



*Dark Skies* shares not just its skin-disfigured imagery but its multiply resonant Independence Day setting with a different kind of invasion horror in Barry Levinson's **THE BAY**: a latecomer to the found-footage party, but with strong credentials in the producer involvement of genre

specialist Oren Peli and digital effects masters the brothers Strause. One of the odder works in the Baltimore veteran's increasingly underwatched canon, it wantonly sensationalises the genuine environmental scandals pumping into Chesapeake Bay into an effective if ludicrous

creature-creeper about a town eaten from the inside out by mutant versions of the gross-out parasitic tongue-eating louse *cymothoa exigua*, which grow to giant size on a local diet of chickenshit and nukes, and jump the host species barrier to spoil everyone's fourth of July by infecting anyone who drinks the water with a nastily cinematic death.

It's a strange but infectious symbiotic compromise between indie and Hollywood, science and fantasy, environmental agitprop and genre horror, real-life parasitic isopods (in Christopher Denham's scenes) and digital stuff crawling around under your skin like in *Upstream Color*, and offers a cautionary model of how the Hollywood ecosystem itself contaminates our dreams. We start with something pure and exciting, and end up creating a bottling plant for our own demons downstream.





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